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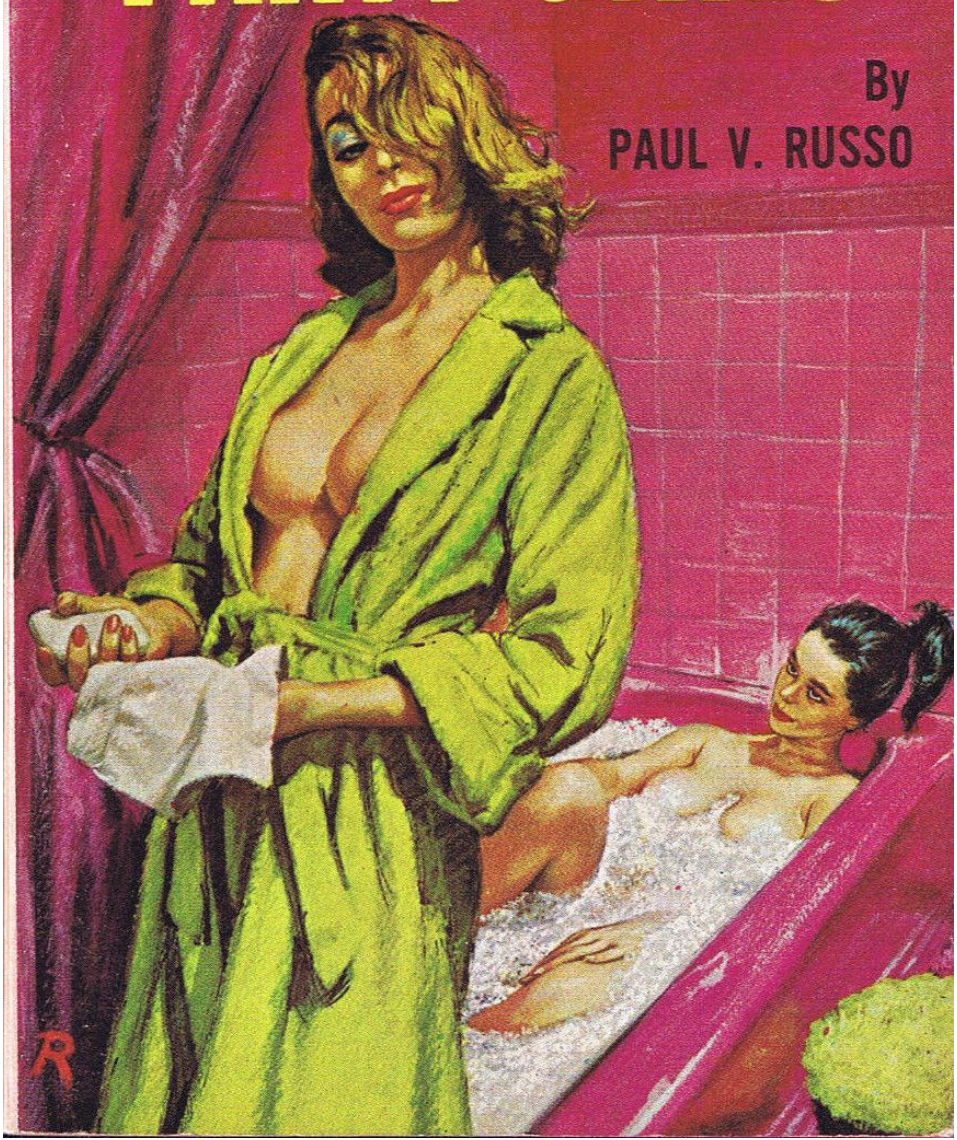
Young, beautiful, bored—it took something different to give them a thrill.

PARTY GIRLS

By
PAUL V. RUSSO



Paul V. Russo

Party Girls

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First edition

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Preface

THE ACTRESS

This was her big chance. Kirsten Osgood was a woman with contacts, big contacts. Bunny shivered excitedly as she heard the noise of the shower stop. The road to success would be paved with Kirsten's kisses and caresses. It was a far easier route to travel than the one dotted with casting couches and cigar-smoking agents and lecherous directors . . . far easier and far faster.

Deliberately, Bunny rolled over on her stomach in a provocative pose. Aware of her physical attributes, she was presenting her best profile, like a movie star just going before the camera. Ready, she closed her eyes, feigning sleep. She heard the bathroom door open and the soft pad of bare feet approaching the bed. I'm asleep, she told herself determinedly. Play the role to the hilt.

Lips touched her back and then the nape of her neck. Hands roamed gently on her naked legs, admiringly, lovingly, seductively. Bunny tried to control the delicious shiver that coursed through her body. It wasn't time to wake up as yet. She had to make her performance come off perfectly if she was going to achieve the desired result.

The warm mouth glided over her smooth flesh. Bunny stirred restlessly, as if her sleep had been disturbed. She rolled over on her back, her lashes fluttering groggily. She lifted them and took her time in focusing on the smiling face that hovered above her.

"Oh, it's you," she mumbled thickly, feigning a yawn.

"Yes, darling, it's me."

The lips dropped to the peaks of her upturned breasts and Bunny gasped in false surprise. "Kirsten! What are you—"

"Please, darling, please."

Bunny hid her smile.

Chapter 1

KIRSTEN OSGOOD awoke slowly, lingeringly, keeping her eyelids sealed against the intrusive daylight that sought to penetrate the dark depths of slumber. She stirred sleepily and then shuddered in surprised delight as flesh brushed her fingertips. Soft flesh. Soft, sweet, feminine flesh.

How nice . . .

Her hand investigated. How nice to wake up like this and not be alone. She had company. And judging by the rounded curves of the smooth skin under her foraging fingers, it was pleasant company indeed. Lovely.

Lovely enough to be—

No. Of course not. It couldn't be Tecla. Tecla's breasts were bigger. Ever so much bigger. But these were nice just the same, and the way they responded to her touch was positively delicious. Even now, so soon, the nipple was stiffening in sensitive reaction and nuzzling into the hollow of her palm.

She played with it. Tweaked it. And wondered just who the hell it was that owned this remarkably receptive pair of fruit-firm breasts. Someone young, that was for sure. Someone young enough and perhaps even pretty enough to make her forget Tecla.

Come on, Kirsten, quit kidding yourself . . .

All right, so nobody was going to make her forget Tecla Sheffield. Not entirely, anyway. And she knew damn well that the only reason she was hesitant to open her eyes was the fear of the disappointment that would follow so inevitably. Waking up and not seeing that beautiful head of glossy black hair fanned out across the pillow was always a source of pain.

Still, this was kind of interesting. It wasn't Tecla, but it was the next best thing. It was young and probably cute, and considering the obviousness of the situation, it was certainly willing. And its very anonymity made the whole business that much more intriguing. Practically a guessing game.

Not that there was any actual guesswork involved. Because it really didn't matter. A pickup was still a pickup. And on the morning after a drunken spree there wasn't much sense

in trying to rationalize. So what difference did it make who the girl turned out to be?

Anyway, the soft flesh smelled nice. Sweet—and with traces of spicy perfume still persistent. Did it taste as good as it smelled? It was hard to remember. It was hard to remember anything of what happened last night.

With eyes still shut tightly, Kirsten bent her head and let her lips replace the exploratory fingers. The aroused nipple seemed to burgeon even more and beg for her flicking tongue.

And oh yes, it tasted just fine. Let the rest of the world sit down to strawberries and cream for breakfast. This was better. Infinitely better, even if it didn't have much in the way of vitamin content. After all, it didn't have any fat-producing calories. No. All it had was pleasure. And that was enough.

Well, *almost* enough . . .

Dammit, no! She wasn't going to torture herself with memories of Tecla. She wasn't going to think of things like love and loyalty and settling down with one person for a lifetime of happiness. Maybe such things weren't for lesbians anyway.

"Hey, what . . ."

The girl was awakening, speaking in muffled monosyllables, but Kirsten was too busy to try to decipher them. The dainty breasts were tastier than strawberries and cream but they only served to stimulate her appetite. There was lots more of this wonderful womanflesh to breakfast upon.

"Oh, it's you, Kirsten!"

"Shhh . . ."

"Please, I don't want—"

"Relax, darling."

The unknown "darling" relaxed. But only for a moment, and suddenly Kirsten felt forceful hands in her hair tearing her away from the desired breakfast dish. "Kirsten, stop! Please . . ."

The voice sounded faintly familiar, and the guessing game was over. Kirsten muttered a small oath of frustration, opened her eyes and sat up.

What she saw was by no means displeasing. The girl—Bunny something-or-other, she remembered vaguely—was no youngster, but she was blonde and petite and quite pretty. A cuddly type. Only now she didn't seem to be in the mood for cuddling, and there was a hint of aggrieved annoyance in her hazel-green eyes.

"Okay, I'm stopped," Kirsten said drily. "Although why you wanted me to, I'll never know.

I thought I was doing you a favor waking you up like this. Don't you like it?"

"Oh, I do, I do." Melting contrition warmed the girl's tone. "But I've got such a frightful hangover. Like a dozen bongo-drums banging inside my skull."

"Sorry . . ." Kirsten nodded sympathetically. "Sex and headaches just don't mix. Want some aspirin?"

"Yes, please."

Kirsten slid out of bed, mildly startled as her gaze fell upon the clock dial. It was well into the afternoon, certainly no time for anyone to be suffering from a hangover of the "morning-after" variety. But little Bunny's misery was apparently real and as she swallowed the proffered pills and water, Kirsten stroked the tousled golden curls with a show of tenderness. "There now," she murmured. "You'll feel better soon. Why don't you sleep a little while longer?"

"Oh, yes, may I? I mean—well, I won't be in the way, will I? I wouldn't want to overstay my welcome."

"Don't worry about it." Kirsten was touched by the girl's childish politeness. "As a matter of fact, I've got a mess of phone calls to make. I've got a party scheduled for tonight and I'm completely disorganized."

"A party?"

"Uh-huh. I'm having some people over—including my boss. He likes my brand of booze and entertainment."

Bunny seemed less sleepy somehow. "Your boss?" Her eyes narrowed. "You mean Noah Rudin?"

"Oh. You know who I work for, huh?"

"I-I guess so. I remember Tecla mentioning something about it last night. It *was* last night, wasn't it?"

Kirsten smiled. "If today is Sunday, it was. But stop fretting about it, honey." Again she patted the soft hair. "Just take a little nap and let those aspirins work. I'll use the phone in the living room so you won't be disturbed."

"You can call from here. I won't mind."

"No, I've got the list of numbers out there." She pulled the bedsheet up over the girl's naked body. "You just go to sleep." With a final caress of the tender cheek, she turned and started away, her mind already busy with thoughts of phoning the caterers and a few as-yet-uninvited guests.

"Kirsten?"

"Hmm?" She swung around in the doorway.

"Uh . . ." Bunny stretched lazily, kicking the sheet off in the same movement. "If you . . . if you want to come in and wake me up like you did before . . ."

"Oh?"

But the girl's eyes were already closed. With one leg drawn up and the other extended, the nude cream-and-gold body was breathtakingly alluring. It beckoned and bewitched, seconding the invitation which had just been offered.

Chuckling, Kirsten padded away. A delightful child, really, and so anxious to make amends for her temporary reluctance. Although not exactly a child, either—for all her girlish cuteness little Bunny was obviously closer to thirty than to twenty. Still, she was quite a lovely thing, and that last provocative invitation of hers would bear looking into.

But not right now, Kirsten decided. There was work to be done, much work. Tossing a party for someone like Noah Rudin was no snap. Especially since she never knew just what kind of party his ever-mercurial mood and temperament might demand.

Funny about last night, though. She certainly hadn't mentioned the fact that she worked for Noah. She seldom did, for that matter-it sounded too much like fancy name-dropping. *The* Noah Rudin, people always said, Noah Rudin the producer? And then the conversation would switch to Broadway plays and musicals and become an irksome bore. Everybody in New York knew all about two kinds of business, it seemed, their own and show business.

No, she certainly hadn't told Bunny about it. And she just couldn't place Bunny and Tecla in the same sequence of events; it must have happened at that big table in the gay joint in the Village. They had probably gotten together in the drunken confusion, and Tecla had spilled the beans. Or maybe the two of them were old friends from way back? Or at least acquaintances if not buddies.

That was it, more than likely. Of course. Right after Tecla got peeved and walked out—for no reason at all, practically—wasn't that when little Bunny became so available?

Kirsten frowned. It was definitely an annoying notion, but it was all pretty damn clear now. If Bunny knew she worked for Noah Rudin, well, no wonder the kid had been so willing. Just another actress looking for the big break, that was all. And using every possible means—including the offer of her body—to get it.

Oh well, no matter. After a couple of years of it, she was pretty much inured to such goings-on among the young hopefuls of the theatre. Still, it would be nice to be loved for

herself alone some time and not because she was a potential stepping-stone to fame and fortune on the stage. Knowing that Bunny was aware of her show-business connections made her feel almost like a well-heeled John dealing with a bought-and-paid-for hooker.

Only she certainly hadn't bought Bunny, of course—she hadn't promised a damn thing. Nor did she plan to. If a little sex was all the kid wanted, well—okay, that was just dandy. But if the bed was meant to be an entry into the good graces of Noah Rudin—no, thanks. Noah had his own casting couch for that purpose.

One way or the other, though, it was time to get her mind off Tecla and Bunny and sex. Time to clear the decks for action. If these phone calls weren't made soon, there'd be no telling how tonight's party would wind up. And she just couldn't afford to run a dull affair when Noah Rudin was involved.

Okay, Kirsten, get to work . . .

But she couldn't. Dammit, she just couldn't. Even for a few lousy telephone calls, it was hard to concentrate. That interrupted session back there in the bedroom had started something, and now it was like a flame licking at her vitals. And there was only one way to extinguish it.

No. The hell with it. It would be wrong to go in there and wake Bunny up so soon. A hangover was a nasty thing, and those aspirins just hadn't had time to take effect yet. The poor kid would probably start complaining right off the bat. And if she didn't-well, there was danger in that too. Once begun, a boudoir matinee could go on for hours and hours. And if that happened, those very necessary calls would never get made.

All right then, business before pleasure. The telephone first-it had to be done. After that, maybe a shower. Perhaps a pot of coffee would be nice, too.

And then—ah yes . . . sweet little Bunny . . .

What the hell, there was no need for coffee, either. Why go puttering around in the kitchen when breakfast was already waiting for her? Breakfast in bed. Strawberries and cream and all those tasty tidbits and goodies.

Quivering in anticipation, Kirsten forced herself to settle down to her job. But even as she twisted the telephone dial, the vision of the girl's youthful loveliness hung in the back of her mind. The naked body. The sweetly curved breasts that were so easily aroused. The shapely, seductively posed legs that were like separate guideposts to paradise. To a paradise flowing with milk and honey—rich and fertile with nourishment—

Mmm, yes-breakfast in bed . . .

Chapter 2

THE room had the rancid aura of unwashed underwear about it. Soiled clothing was piled into a mound in one corner; in another, greasy dishes were heaped in the sink of the open kitchenette, a mecca for the nasty little creatures who made the nightly pilgrimage to wallow in the stale spaghetti-sauce. On the floor, the threadbare rug was an oasis for the nomadic dust-motes that seeped in through cracks in the grimy windows and thumbed their noses at the bedsheets that had not been changed in weeks.

Only the upright piano, standing in solitary splendor against the wall opposite the bed, represented any link with detergent-happy contemporary civilization. It was old but it was clean, and its well-scrubbed keys gleamed in bright contrast to the dingy setting. Even the music manuscript that rested on the tilted mahogany front looked neat and unsmudged; the hand-lettered notes and clefs had all been painstakingly inked in.

"Frankie, how can you live like this?" Tecla Sheffield wrinkled her nose in distaste. "This place is a pigsty. And it gets worse every time I see it."

Frankie Mann placed his arms behind his head and leaned back on the pillow, one bare and bony knee crossed over its upraised mate. "You ought to visit me more often. Maybe you wouldn't notice it so much then."

Tecla shook her head. "It's filthy, positively filthy. And this is the last time I'm ever going to come." She sat primly on a rickety chair in the middle of the room, avoiding any tactile contact with the surrounding squalor.

Lying on the bed in shorts and T-shirt, Frankie had a mottled, off-white look about him, as if he were a chameleon who had camouflaged his complexion to dovetail with the environment. Even his light brown mustache, sparse and unkempt, seemed more like a forgotten foodstain than an honest adornment.

"Come on, glamor-puss," he said, "you know it's not that bad. I did a massage job on the piano just yesterday. Had it tuned, too."

"You and that piano." She glanced at the majestic instrument and the chiseled-ivory texture of her face melted. "That's the trouble—you love your music too much. You always

take better care of it than you do of yourself."

"Why not? It's more important."

"Oh, you're fantastic. Do you think starving in a Village hovel is going to make a great musician out of you?"

"Tecla baby, I *am* a great musician. And I remember when you used to think so, too."

Suddenly uncomfortable, she leaned down to brush a speck of dust from the pointed toe of one shoe. "I still think so," she said after a moment, "but nobody else does. What's more, they never will not as long as you stay cooped up like a hermit and play for an audience of old socks and dirty dishes."

"I play for myself, baby. Me, Frankie Mann, that's who I play for. That's how I get my kicks."

"Would you play for someone else's kicks some time? Suppose there was somebody around who could help you."

"Like who, for instance?"

"Noah Rudin."

Frankie's forehead crinkled and he looked like a quizzical little gnome peering out of suspicious eyes. "Rudin? The big-wheel Broadway producer?"

"That's the one."

"Hey, what's this, something new? Tecla, I didn't even know you knew the guy."

"Well, I don't, actually. But he's going to be at a party I'm going to tonight. And I can get you invited if you want to come and play for him."

"Yeah? Whose party?"

"Woman named Osgood. Kirsten Osgood. She's got one of those big apartments off Riverside Drive."

Frankie scowled. "West Side chick. A square?"

"Definitely not. In her own way, she's pretty hip. She's designed sets for some of Rudin's shows. She's a lush though, so the party'll be damp."

"And you can get me invited? Just like that? I didn't realize you had such influence. How come?"

Tecla bit her lip. "Oh, you might as well know. You'll find out sooner or later anyway. Kirsten Osgood is gay. Not an obvious type but she's pretty butchy just the same. And she digs me."

"Yeah?" Frankie grinned. "How's she making out?"

"None of your damn business."

"Uh-huh. Well, I guess that's as good an answer as any. Baby, since when did you start going that route?"

Tecla shrugged. "Okay, don't rub it in. I had a little fling with her a while back. You know me—I'll try anything once. You know how bored I get sometimes when—"

"Cut the apologies, sweetie. If you want to make the dyke scene, it's okay with me."

"It's over, Frankie. I made it and it's over. Only Kirsten doesn't think so. She's still got the hots for me. That's how come I can get you invited tonight. But never mind her—it's *you* I'm thinking of. Play some of your original stuff for Noah Rudin and maybe you can do yourself some good."

"Oh sure. Baby, I can't figure it. A couple of weeks you don't even drop in to say hello, and now you're giving me the big helping-hand. What makes you so interested in my career all of a sudden?"

Her smile was vaguely sorrowful. "Old times' sake, Frankie. I guess I'm just thinking about how it used to be with us—Pearlie Shapiro and Frankie Mannheimer on a bench in Prospect Park. Remember those days?"

He smirked. "Days?"

"All right, wise guy. Nights, then."

"Yeah, glamor-puss, I remember. Too bad we had to grow up. Now we don't fit together any more."

"Don't we, Frankie?"

"Hell, you know what I mean. You're out of my league now. You've got class, Tecla. Four years of college made a real uptown-type chick out of you."

"You could have gone."

"Me go to college? What for? So I could learn to fill out my unemployment form in Latin?"

Tecla laughed. "Okay, you win. You crossed the river from Brooklyn to the Village, but you're still the same old Frankie. Anyway, I want you to play for Noah Rudin tonight. Will you?"

"Yeah, I guess so. If he can stand it, I can."

"Promise?"

"I said okay, didn't I? Stop pressuring me."

"Good. Come around ten o'clock." She snapped her handbag open and rummaged

through it for pencil and paper. "I'll scribble down the address so you won't have any excuses."

"What do I need it for? Can't I go with you?"

"No, Frankie. I'm sorry. I can't stay here. I'm meeting Hal Greener for cocktails and dinner."

"That cornball? I thought you'd be fed up with him by now."

"Not quite," she said wryly. "I may marry him."

"Baby, no!"

"Baby, yes. Why shouldn't I? Sure, he's kind of dull, but he loves me and he's got money."

"I'll be damned," Frankie muttered. "How about all that career crap? Your name in lights and all that jazz. You used to be pretty hopped-up about it."

"That's exactly what it's been—just a lot of jazz. I can't act, and about the only thing I'm good for on a stage is a half-naked chorus line." Her lips twisted in self-derision. "And I also happen to be a lousy model, if you must know. I make a living at it and my picture is in the magazines, but it's getting me nowhere—and I do mean nowhere."

"Glamor-girl, what are you—"

"Don't con me, Frankie-I *know*. Modeling is work, hard work, and I'm tired of it. So why shouldn't I marry Hal and his money and take it easy for a while?"

"Okay, but why pick Greener? There's dozens of other guys you might latch on to."

"Hah!" She tossed her head, and the motion sent glints of reflected light coursing over her blue-black hair. "The characters I know just don't talk marriage. And Hal Greener does. Frankie, I'm not getting any younger, you know."

"You look good to me, baby."

"No doubt. But I don't hear *you* talking marriage, either."

"Well, like I said, you're out of my league."

"Then stop griping about Hal. He's a square, but maybe I can make him over to please myself. By the way, he'll be at Kirsten's place tonight, so be nice, will you? Don't needle him."

Frankie chuckled. "Who, me?"

"Yes, you. Here's the address. I'll expect to see you some time around ten tonight."

He reached over and took the slip of paper from her. "Do you have to leave right away, baby?"

"I should. Besides, I told you I was serious about Greener. I shouldn't be hanging around here goofing with you."

"Okay, I get the message."

Tecla made no move to get up from her chair. "Well . . . I do have some time to kill and this *is* the last time I'll be coming here. So how about it—want to play a little piano for me before I go?"

"Sure, honey, anything you say. I've been working on some new stuff that's really far out."

"No, don't play the new things—save them for Kirsten's place. Just do some of the oldies for me, the numbers you were working on when—well, you know . . ."

"What's come over you, doll? Getting sentimental?"

"Why not? We're saying good-by, aren't we?"

"Sweetie, you've got something there. You're absolutely right." He leaned over, stretching an arm out to the bedside table. The single drawer creaked open and his tapering fingers, remarkably clean and well-kept in comparison to the rest of him, foraged among the debris. "If it's good-by we ought to get real sentimental, huh? How much time before you're scheduled to meet Greener?"

"About an hour. But I don't think I—"

"Don't get panicky, glamor-girl. I just figured maybe we'd split a happy weed for old times' sake. So do we have time to light up?"

She watched the agile fingers extricate a slim hand-rolled cigarette from a flat case in the drawer. An expectant glitter appeared in her eyes. "Well now, I don't know . . ."

"It's great pot, baby. Chicago light green." He lit the cigarette and sucked at it with a sibilant hiss, taking in a mixture of air and marijuana smoke in the same breath.

"Frankie, I shouldn't. You know what the damn stuff does to me. Once I get started I won't want to stop."

"You won't have to. I'll give you a couple of sticks to take along when you leave."

"Oh, you're such a rat—but a lovable one. I'll probably be drifting around in a daze all night."

"So what? Here, take a little poke. It'll put you in the right spirit for my music." He inhaled again and held the glowing weed in front of her. As she reached up he pulled it back away from her hand, letting the smoke escape from his lungs. "Unless you don't have time," he said quietly.

"I've got time. Greener can wait. He'll wait just as long as I care to keep him waiting." She took the marijuana cigarette and smoked it with an easy familiarity. "You've sure got that square hooked, huh?"

She nodded emphatically. "Whenever two people get together, that's the way it works out—*somebody* has to be the boss. And right now Hal Greener's got little Tecla on a pedestal while he worships at her beautiful feet. Know what I mean?"

"I know, I know. Take another drag while I play pretty for you. Like for old times' sake." He went to the piano and chorded a few bars, kneading the melody to fit the mood. "Relax," he murmured over his shoulder. "Relax and let it hit you."

"I'm relaxed."

"Yeah? You don't look like it. Baby, why don't you get out of that stiff chair and get real loose?"

As if the suggestion had started a chain reaction, Tecla rose and glided toward the bed, her hips swaying with each step. The partially smoked cigarette dangled from her lacquered fingertips. "My dress . . ." Her voice was barely audible above the sound of the piano.

The music softened. "Hmm?"

"My dress. It'll get messed up."

"So?"

"So I'd better take it off. Want to give me a hand with this damn zipper?"

"Sure, baby, in a minute. Soon as I finish this lick."

Bony shoulders hunched over and leaning into the keyboard, thin lips curled in satisfaction, Frankie let chord follow chord in a lazy progression, taking his time, his own sweet time . . .

Chapter 3

HE tried to concentrate on what he was doing. On what was being done to him. But it wasn't easy, and he kept thinking of business. Things like dramas and musicals and writers and stars and directors and scene designers and—

"Noah . . ."

"Hmm?"

"What's the matter?" Lilith's tone was petulant. "Would you rather we stopped? Am I boring you?"

"Boring me? Baby, baby . . ."

"I was beginning to wonder."

Noah Rudin stirred into motion. His fingers slipped over the beautifully curved and naked body. The smooth flesh trembled responsively at his touch. But even as his hand traveled the familiar territory, he was all too conscious of the fact that he was putting on an act. And not a very good act at that. It would never have passed muster in one of his own shows. Or any other halfway decent show.

Decent?

He chuckled. Words had so many different meanings. Right now they were playing a scene that was about as *indecent* as a scene could get. Unless it was a performance in one of those commercial sex-circuses in Rome or Paris.

"Noah, what the hell are you laughing at?"

"Huh? Oh. Sorry, honey. Anyway, if I'm laughing, at least you can be sure I'm not bored."

"Bastard!"

But the epithet was spoken with a giggle, and suddenly he didn't feel like laughing any more. Because she was smothering the giggle—in her own delightful way—and her lips were remarkably facile. Sighing, he surrendered himself to her expert technique.

And it was expert, he realized. After so many times together—so many sessions just like this—he still had to marvel at the scientific skill of Lilith Devereaux's lovemaking. In bed, the woman was a positive genius. But then why shouldn't she be? It was all she lived for.

Sex. All kinds of sex. And she had plenty of time for it, time to do what she wanted and polish her amatory technique to the peak of perfection. The mundane business of making a living never bothered Lilith. Money was no problem. Not as long as the Devereaux family owned half the oranges in Florida and paid their errant daughter a small fortune to keep her scandalous presence elsewhere.

He gasped as the seeking lips came to the end of their search. Her mouth was an abyss, hot and wet and avid and everything a man could wish for. The tip of her tongue darted here and there, seemingly at random but never truly so, for Lilith always knew exactly what she was doing. Especially in bed.

He shuddered and clutched her hair.

"No," she murmured.

His grip slackened. Oh, she knew what she was doing, all right. And it wasn't only her mouth that displayed such marvelous facility, either. Even now, in the midst of her highly-centralized assault, she was not neglecting her campaign against the fringe areas. Her hands were busy. He could feel her taut-nippled breasts pressing and rubbing his legs. And yet at no time did the aggressive lips seem to lose track of the all-over campaign.

On the contrary. Her mouth was the prime factor. And yet, somehow, he felt as if every square inch of her soft-fleshed body was actively engaged. Not that any of those inches were actually square. Oh no. There was nothing square or flat about Lilith's body. A straight line would have been pitifully out of place among such an abundant profusion of convex curves and concave curves and S-shaped curves and even a few crazy curves that defied classification. There was nothing square about Lilith Devereaux.

But enough of this geometry, he told himself. Round or square, what the hell, it made no difference now. Because she was getting to him—there was no room in his mind for thoughts of curves and planes and angles. And damn little room for thoughts about show business, either.

In fact, no room at all.

His muscles tensed. He wheezed and fought for breath. Again his hands reached for her hair. He couldn't help it. Even when she shook her head to tell him not to, he couldn't help it. And yes, even when she tried to voice her dissent aloud, he couldn't help it.

The negative words were never spoken. Because his fingers were wrapped in the tangled mop of her dark hair and they wouldn't let go. Maybe it was too soon for her. Maybe he hadn't reached what she considered a logical conclusion. Maybe she had notions of going on

and on with what she was doing. But for the life of him he couldn't do anything but quake and groan and hang on tight and let his entire being be swallowed in an abyss of ecstasy.

He just couldn't help it . . .

"Still bored?" she said after a moment.

"Hmm?"

"You heard me."

"Uh—let me catch my breath."

"Okay, take five and catch it. Cigarette?"

"Please"

She licked her lips. "I'll smoke yours, if you don't mind." She reached for the silver cigarette-box. "You know, this is the only time I actually prefer menthols to regulars. Must be the cooling effect, I guess."

"Huh? Oh." He grinned wanly. "Stop chattering and light me up, will you?"

"Yes, sir!"

He took the lit cigarette from her. Strength—or at least a semblance thereof—began to flow back into his limbs.

"Now, young lady, what's all this about being bored?"

"I'm not so young." She smiled and then grew abruptly serious. "Noah, let's face it. You *were* bored."

"Not for long."

"True. I fixed that, didn't I? But it doesn't change the picture, lover boy. It happened and that's that. The handwriting is on the wall and we don't have to squint to read it."

"Lilith, what are you saying?"

She made a face. "Cards on the table and all that sort of thing. You see, Noah, I guess I was a little bored, too."

"Oh?"

"Is that all you've got to say?"

"What else is there?" He shrugged. "Anyway, I've been expecting it. Remember what we said in the beginning, baby? No strings. So we had a happy affair and now it's ended." He grinned. "Hmm, sounds like a great cue for a torch song."

"Noah, you're a doll. I just wish all the men I've known were as understanding as you are."

"Oh, I understand, all right."

"Damn right you do. Believe me, I like you for it. I think the two of us will always be good

friends."

"Just friends, Lilith? Lovers no more? Not even a quick roll in the hay once in a while?"

"Just friends, that's all. I'm a one-man woman. One man at a time, anyway. Once an affair is over I like to break clean. Without any loose threads or ragged edges. Don't you agree?"

"In general, yes—it simplifies matters. But with you, well, I'm not quite so positive. Even if the big kick is gone, we're still pretty good together."

"No doubt. But it's the big kick that I'm looking for, Noah. A casual quickie just doesn't do anything for me. I get all wrapped up with one guy—just as I did with you—and as long as the thrill lasts, I don't care much about anyone else. And when the thrill is finished it's time to move on."

"And it's time, right?"

"Well, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. At any rate, Lilith, I bow to your better judgment. You're the expert. You know more about sex than anybody I've ever tangled with."

"Coming from you, that's quite a compliment."

"I'm only saying it because it's true. Baby, I've been around. I know talent when I see it. And you're the greatest. Frankly, I'm going to miss these cozy Sunday afternoons."

"Me too."

"Oh? Hey, don't look so sad."

"Don't let it bother you, Noah. I'm always a bit sad at the end of an affair. It salves my conscience and then I don't feel so guilty about being such an immoral bitch. A little wailing and gnashing of teeth is a good thing, you know. For me, anyway. It makes my heart pure again."

"Uh-huh. Well, please don't shed any tears."

"Why not? I like to have a little cry now and then just for the sheer enjoyment of it." Her eyes brightened. "Besides, it clears my mind of any leftover emotions—and then I can start getting into the mood for my next affair."

"Your next affair! So soon?"

"The sooner the better, as far as I'm concerned. It's a short life and I don't want to waste a minute of it. So it's off with the old and on with the new."

"Such a rush. Got anybody lined up?"

"Noah, you know better. While we were making it together I wasn't even thinking about anybody else. I'll just have to get out and start looking, I guess."

"It shouldn't take long to find someone."

"No? That's what *you* say. Noah, it gets tougher all the time. So many men are alike in bed. And unless they've got some new, wild kick to offer, I'm just not interested."

"Hmm, I can see what you mean. If you keep at it long enough you're bound to run out of material. It's the same in the theatre. Damn few playwrights ever come up with anything really new."

"That's a pretty good analogy. But it doesn't help solve my problem any. I guess I'm just jaded."

"In that case, why not return to the grass roots? Find yourself a truck-driver or a longshoreman. A guy with muscles rather than brains. That ought to be a new twist for you."

"No, thanks. I've tried it."

"Oh. Well, how about a young boy?"

She shrugged. "I've tried that too. See, Noah? I told you it wasn't easy. Any more suggestions?"

"Hmm, let's see. No, I guess not. Not offhand, anyway. You're so right, baby. All us guys are pretty much alike."

"I'm rapidly coming to that conclusion. One of these days, maybe I'll switch to girls."

"You? Lilith, you're kidding. You're a man's woman if I ever saw one."

"Sure, but it gets harder and harder to find the right man. The lezzie bit would be something completely new for me."

"You mean it, honey? Because if you do, well, I've got just the gal for you. Want me to fix it up?"

"Thanks, no. I prefer to do my own fixing."

"Okay, but don't say I didn't try."

"You *are* a doll, Noah. What other man would be so generous? Tell you what, though—maybe I'll take you up on your kind offer. Don't fix anything up—but I *would* like to meet your friend."

"No sooner said than done. You can meet her tonight. In fact, you can meet a whole slew of gay girls if you're interested."

"Hey, that sounds like fun. Tonight?"

Noah nodded. "One of my set designers is having a bit of a shindig later on. Woman named Kirsten Osgood. If you're really serious about what you said, I'll take you along."

"I'd like that."

"It's a deal then. You and Kirsten should get along fine. And even if you don't, there'll be plenty of others to pick and choose from. There always are at Kirsten's parties."

"Oh, it gets me excited just thinking about it."

"Is that so? Funny, I never would have figured it. I guess you're more of a lezzie than I thought."

"Oh, it's not that, Noah. Not really. It's just the novelty of the thing that appeals to me. The newness of it. I'm wondering how it will feel."

"I'll show you."

"Don't be silly. You can't. You're a man."

He snorted. "Don't hold that against me. Just close your eyes and you'll never know the difference. Want to?"

"Well . . ."

"Lilith, our affair is dead." He began sliding down toward the foot of the bed. "But what the hell, the least we can do is give it a nice funeral." His lips browsed delicately. "Okay?"

"Mmm, yes . . ." Her soft body began to rotate. "Uh-huh. I like that. Oh, you're such a doll."

"I'm a doll, all right."

"Please don't talk. It spoils the illusion. If you want to agree with me, just nod your head."

He nodded. It seemed like a good idea. And from the way her body reacted, it was evident that she was pleased by his acquiescence. He bobbed his head up and down again, and felt her immediate response. Yes, it was nice that two people could attain such an amazing degree of mutual understanding without breaking silence.

Chapter 4

BUNNY BAILEY lay upon the unfamiliar bed and listened to the noise of the spattering shower. The aspirins had worked their medicinal magic and her headache was gone. But she had not fallen asleep after Kirsten left to make her phone calls. How could there be any sleep with this recent and somewhat startling development to think about?

So Kirsten was planning a party tonight! And Noah Rudin was invited. *The* Noah Rudin! The guy that every stage-struck kid in New York would give an arm and a leg to get next to. And guess who was the most stage-struck kid in town?

Not that she was a kid any longer, dammit. Those days were gone forever. But she still looked like a kid and acted like one, and sometimes she even felt that way. And as for being stage-struck, well, it was hard to remember the time when she hadn't been. The theatre was her life, and it always would be. Dedicated—that was the word for how she felt about it. Dedicated to the stage. And it was high time someone took notice of just how dedicated she was. Someone in the position to do something about it.

Someone like Noah Rudin?

Damn right. It was the golden opportunity to end all golden opportunities. Studded with diamonds and rubies and star-sapphires, yet. No one else ranked as high on Broadway as Noah Rudin. He had more hit shows running than anybody in the racket. And he kept putting new ones on the boards with remarkable regularity. Everything he touched seemed to turn to platinum.

Bunny stirred restlessly. If she couldn't take advantage of this situation she might as well give up and stick her head in the gas-oven. That was how important it was. Just the chance to meet the guy, that was all she wanted. And in the bathroom, under that pouring shower, was the key to the entire issue.

Kirsten Osgood.

Strange the way things worked out sometimes. Last night Tecla had told her that Kirsten was hooked up with Noah Rudin in some way. But that kind of talk seldom turned out to be true. In theatrical circles, exaggeration was the rule rather than the exception. Everybody

dropped big names left and right, and no one really paid a great deal of attention to it.

Still, it had seemed like a smart move at the time, going home with the Osgood dame. If it did turn out to be true, it was certainly a step in the right direction. And if it didn't, well, what was there to lose? The woman was clean and well-dressed and not at all bad-looking. And a little offbeat—sex never really did anybody any major harm, did it? So why not give it a whirl?

Well, it hadn't been much of a whirl up to now. They had both been too stoned to do much last night. And a while ago, that hung-over feeling had just been too awful. Which meant, of course, that if there was any whirling to be done, the time was now. Just as soon as Kirsten Osgood stepped out of the shower and came into the bedroom.

Bunny felt herself grow tense with excitement. Oh, it wasn't a sexual thing, really—she didn't much care about Kirsten, one way or the other. Or any woman, for that matter. Lesbianism was just another phase of sex that she dabbled with every now and then. After all, an actress preparing for a career had to try everything, didn't she? Maybe it wasn't exactly the kind of preparation recommended by The Actors Studio, but it was necessary nevertheless. The gay kick was too prevalent to bypass; it cropped up all the time, and sooner or later every chick learned to play along with it.

But *this* excitement was of a different nature. It had nothing to do with sex. Or very little, anyway. No, this was the same feeling she got when she was called to read for a part. Or when she rubbed shoulders with a bigwig in the business who could do her some good. Not that Kirsten Osgood was a bigwig, actually, but the woman certainly was in solid with one. The biggest of bigwigs. Yes, it was a step in the right direction, all right.

What a lucky break!

But she would have to tread the step carefully, Bunny realized. As yet, no invitation to the party had been offered. But it would be, she was sure. It had to be. The road to Noah Rudin was paved with Kirsten Osgood's kisses and caresses.

Not that those kisses and caresses would be hard to take. Definitely not. Kirsten was an interesting female and there was no doubt that she would be good in bed with her own brand of lovemaking. But Kirsten Osgood wasn't really important.

And Noah Rudin *was!*

The noise of the shower stopped. Deliberately, Bunny rolled over on her stomach in a provocative pose. Her back was quite pretty. She was aware that it was one of her main attributes and she was anxious to offer an unimpeded view of her dimpled buttocks. Like a

movie star presenting her best profile to the camera.

There. Now she was ready. She closed her eyes, feigning sleep. In a few minutes she would let herself be awakened. Drowsily. Languorously. Just as if her mind hadn't been racing at top speed ever since the first mention of Noah Rudin.

She heard the bathroom door open. Sounds of footsteps coming toward her. I'm asleep, she told herself. I'm an actress playing the role of a sleeping girl approached by her lover. No, not just an actress. A good actress. The best.

Oh, it was marvelous to lie here like this and know that she was about to embark on a great new adventure.

Lips touched the nape of her neck. Soft lips. She could feel the warm breath on her skin. She did not stir. The lips moved. Slowly, gently, they glided down her spine. Ah yes, her judgment of Kirsten's style of loving had not been amiss. The woman was good. No rush. No frantic haste. Just a nice prolonged build-up to the great awakening scene.

A warm tongue teased with little circular motions. It tickled, and her flesh quivered involuntarily. An open mouth paid delicate tribute to the beauty of those deep dimples.

Time to wake up?

No, not yet. Sleep a little while longer. Sleep and enjoy the skilled caresses. Make it last a long time. But not too long. She couldn't afford to let herself get carried away by the proficiency of those kisses. Much more of this and she'd be forgetting she was an actress in need of work. Another few minutes and that mouth would—

What the hell! What was the woman doing now? *That?* Well, it was certainly a new twist, that was for sure. Stimulating, to say the least. Oh yes. Far too stimulating. Too much so to allow her to pretend she was asleep any longer.

"Huh? Oh . . ."

"Awake at last?"

"Oooh, that's nice." The sensation was exquisite. And she was so sensitive there. Funny she hadn't realized it before.

Kirsten was pushing her now, pushing and turning her over on her back. *This* was rather ordinary. And if something wasn't done to stave off the imminent invasion, it would soon be too late.

"Kirsten?"

No answer.

"Kirsten. Darling, wait. Please."

"Hmm? Wait for what?"

"Oh, you're so impatient."

"Shhh . . ."

"Kirsten, please! Wait a minute."

"Oh, all right."

"Mmm, that's better. Now talk to me. I'm awake now. And somehow I feel like a stranger to you. Darling, we hardly even know each other."

"Huh? Bunny, what are you yapping about? You slept here with me last night. Right in this bed. So how can we possibly be strangers?"

"I'm sorry. It's just the way I feel. Anyway, last night we were too stoned to talk. To talk and make sense, I mean."

"I'll say. We were too drunk to do *anything*. That's why I'm so anxious to make up for it."

"Oh . . ."

"Okay, Bunny, don't pout. We'll talk, if that's what you want. So what'll we talk about?"

"Well uh . . . I just want to get to know you better, that's all. No, not that way . . ." She stilled the movement of Kirsten's roving hand.

"No?"

"Well . . ."

"See? Why talk? One picture is worth a thousand words." Kirsten lowered her head to Bunny's bosom. "And one kiss is worth a thousand pictures."

"But—"

"Hush. We'll talk some other time."

"Some other time? Kirsten, when? Tonight?"

Kirsten's head shot up. "Tonight? Sorry, Bunny, no dice. I told you I was having people over tonight."

"Oh. That's right, you did. I remember your saying it now. But couldn't I come, too?"

"No. And don't ask me why not."

"Oh."

"You're pouting again, Bunny. Disappointed?"

"Well, yes. A little."

"Want me to stop?"

"No . . ."

"Then be quiet and relax."

Bunny was quiet, but she was far from relaxed. The nerve of the woman! Turning her down—just like that. Without even making up some kind of excuse. Damn her! It would serve the bitch right to cut her off right now. If only Noah Rudin wasn't involved!

Okay, there was more than one way to skin a cat. And Kirsten Osgood was certainly acting catty, all right. Well, let her go ahead with her kisses and caresses. Let her go ahead and see just how much good it would do her.

Bunny froze. I'm a corpse, she told herself. I'm dead. I can't move. I can't respond. Let her make love to me. It'll be like making love to a corpse.

For a while Kirsten did not seem to notice the change. Bunny could feel the soft path of kisses tracing a line down her belly. Then upon the inner surfaces of her thighs. And then—

Oh, but it was hard to play a corpse. Hard to keep from jerking and twitching and grabbing that head of hair. She could feel herself succumbing to the stabbing tongue.

No. I mustn't. I'm an actress.

"Bunny, what's the matter?"

At last! So the woman had finally taken notice.

"I'm sorry. I'm just upset, I guess. I feel as if you don't care for me. You don't even like me."

"That's silly."

"I suppose so. But I can't help it. Kirsten, I don't mean a thing to you—that's the way I feel. I think you'd be happier if I got up and went home."

"Still pouting, eh?"

"I guess so."

"Well, there's only one way to stop it." Kirsten sighed. "Okay, kid, you win. Want to come to my party tonight?"

Bunny caught her breath. "You mean it?"

"I mean it. Now stop all this faking, baby. You can come tonight, but I want *my* party right now. Understand?"

Bunny understood. But it was all too apparent that there was no need to say so. And in any case, at this point Kirsten would not have heard her. Kirsten was too occupied.

Delightfully so . . .

Bunny relaxed. It was easy now. The door to Noah Rudin had been opened for her. Well, her next job would be to find out a few things about the guy himself. What was he like? What were his kicks? Did he go for sleek sophisticated women? Or teenage youngsters? Whatever it was, she would satisfy him.

Because she was an actress. A damn good actress. And she could throw heart and soul into any part she had to play. Even this one. Yes, this one—right now. She was playing the role of a lesbian. And she'd play hell out of it.

I'm a great actress . . .

She tightened her thighs and arched her back and gripped the bedsheet with her hands in wild frenzy. And when Kirsten's slim body twisted around, she was ready. Ready to play her role to the very hilt.

"Oh, Kirsten, I feel so strange," she panted, responding, play-acting. "I just can't help myself."

She heard Kirsten's passionate moan and smiled to herself.

A great actress!

Chapter 5

OH, it was a sweet feeling and Frankie was a rat to let her get so high, a lovable little rat with a permanent supply of lovable little marijuana cigarettes. And the taxi was bouncing and jouncing and she could barely read the lovable little sign on the back of the driver's seat—SIT BACK AND RELAX, the sign said. Come on, Tecla, you beautiful thing, sit back and relax, relax, relax—brekekekex co-ax co-ax, brekekekex co-ax, co-ax—

Euripides?

Eumenides.

No. Aristophanes. Irving Aristophanes from Flatbush. A sleek Greek in a fit of pique. Hi, Irving, what's new in the Styx? Look, momma, I can speak Greek. College of the City of New York, give a good substantial yell. Dialectic materialism. Political immaturity. *Kyrie eleison*. Only in America. I should send my daughter four years to college to learn Greek? French too, momma. *Merde!*

"You okay, lady?"

"Hmm? Sure, I'm okay."

Glare me no baleful glares, cabbie, you wall-eyed Cyclops. You never had it so good. Don't you know you're chauffeuring the most beautiful girl in the world?

Beautiful—but stoned. Oh, stoned. Roll and roll and roll and gather no moss. As a silver dollar goes from hand to hand, so a woman goes from man to man. So Sheffield goes from Mann to Greener. So Tecla goes from Frankie to Hal. Design for living. Design for dying? Design for lying. Sighing. Denying. The lady doth protest too much, methinks. If Shakespeare were alive he would turn over in his grave. Oh, stoned . . .

So heed the printed word. Sit back and relax. Relax and melt. Melt and drip. Limp as a timepiece by Dali.

No!

Tick, meter, tick-tick-tick, *allegro con moto*. Straighten up, lovely Tecla, straighten up and fly right. High. Oh, high. Chicago and back in a light green sputnik. You can light either end. Look, ma, I can fly.

I'll fly to the arms of my darling, my stuffed-shirt darling. H. Greener, the strong solvent type. Very dry, with lemon peel. Gin by Gordon. Vermouth by Noilly Prat. Panacea by Pal Hal, the square from nowhere—drink up, doll, it won't drown your sorrows but it's bound to irrigate them a little.

Humor by Child Harold. Lucre by stocks and bonds. Street by Wall. Obsession by Sheffield, née Shapiro. She's engaged, she's lovely, she uses marijuana. Oh Frankie, Frankie, filthy Frankie, despoiler of my nymphet maidenhead, pusher of pot, what have you done to me? Can I marry the guy and forsake the weed, the evil Elysian weed?

Matrimony.

Acrimony.

Alimony?

Don't give me that jazz, brother, there must be a better way to make a living. Marry for money and you'll earn every nickel of it. The chains of love are never so binding as when the links are forged of gold. Just a few appropriated words.

Screw you, Greener, you kiwi-bird.

"Turn right, driver."

"Huh? Listen, lady, you told me to—"

"Turn right. East. All the way over to York Avenue. Forget the restaurant address, I've changed my mind."

"Okay, lady."

Oh, you poor saddle-sore hack-jockey, can't you see I'm flying, flying, flying? Sweet bastard Frankie, precocious jackrabbit—flat that fifth, smoke that pot, get a little high and what have you got?

Two sticks.

Two priceless sticks. Fat bombs. Zipper safe in the black depths of the patent-leather purse of the most beautiful girl in the world. Two cigarettes in the dark. Mine. All mine.

Tecla too. Mine. Lead me not to Greener and deliver me from Frankie. Render unto Tecla that which is Tecla's. Smooth-skinned Tecla, beloved of adoring fingers. Mine.

My fingers?

"This where you want to go, lady?"

"This is it, thank you. Sorry if I caused any trouble."

"All in a day's work, lady."

Keep the change. Slam the door. Sound of heels on terrazzo floor. I dreamt I dwelt in

marble halls. Step-step-click-click, patent leather on porphyry.

Prophyry?

How lovely are thy feet in shoes. Arise, my love, and fly away with me. Ninth floor, please. Brass key. Bright and shiny, so Ivy League. Love laughs at Yale locksmiths. How do they open doors at Princeton? Dartmouth boys wash their hands in the rest-room. Harvard men are more careful. Will Yeshiva play in the Sugar Bowl?

Home.

Live alone and love it. Quickly, quickly, quickly, before the mood wears away. Purse by Saks, zipper by Talon, cigarettes by Frankie Mann, matches by—hmm, Angelo's Pizzeria?

No. Wait. Not yet.

Telephone by Bell. "Hello, Kirsten? This is Tecla."

"Tecla, how are—"

"Hold it. No time for chatting. That party of yours—is it still on for tonight?"

"Of course."

"Well, there's a guy I want to bring. Boy named Frankie Mann. Marvelous piano player."

"Tecla, please. Must you? I thought you were coming with Hal Greener?"

"Uh-huh. Greener too. But I want you to hear this piano player. He's great. Okay?"

"If you insist. But I—"

"Can't talk now. See you later."

One down—one to go. Telephone by Ameche. "This is Miss Sheffield. Any messages for me?" So who invented the answering service—Judy Holliday? "What's that? Three times? Well, if Mister Greener calls again you can tell him he just struck out. No, cancel that. Tell him Miss Sheffield regrets she is unable to dine tonight. She'll meet him later at Miss Osgood's place. Thank you."

Forgive me, Miss Otis—pax vobiscum. Miss Sheffield regrets only that her crazy cigarette is unlit. Come on, Angelo, drop that pizza and give the lady a light.

Yes. Ah yes. Thank you, Angelo. Thank you, Frankie. And thank *you*, Tecla. Won't you take off your clothes and get comfortable, you lovely creature? Is it lewd to be wooed in the nude?

Bilitis shall pay Bilitis this night.

Oh!

How beautiful . . . Mirror, mirror on the wall, am I?

Oh, you are, you are, you are. Ever and anon. The most beautiful girl in the world. Mmm,

kiss, kiss, kiss. Here. There. And *there?*

Impossible. Damn! Hey look, momma, I'm a contortionist.

Contortionist, shmontortionist, as long as you shouldn't need no abortionist. A nice Jewish girl like you. A trolley-car you should grow in your stomach yet. And lose my figure? Never. Not this way. Oh no. Never let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Never. Unless you need both hands.

Like this?

Ah, love. Yes. Love-love-love. Like this and this and this. Till the end of time. Till the end of the world. Till the end of the atomic end.

Soon.

No. Not yet. Stop!

There. Good girl. Control. Don't put off till tomorrow what you can put off today. Oh, you ravishing creature, what makes you so brilliant?

What?

This. That's what. A cigarette that bears the lipstick traces. My lipstick. Mmm, very tasty. Sweetest thing since Sucaryl.

Drag . . . deeply . . .

Chicago, Chicago, you wonderful town. You make Tecla so happy. Deleriously happy. Let joy be unrefined. It's a nice town to fly over but I wouldn't want to live there.

Ah yes. *Now*. Fly me to the moon.

Solo . . .

Chapter 6

UNDER the glare of the gooseneck lamp, the small desk was littered with papers and books. A well-thumbed copy of Stanislavski served as a weight for a pile of playscripts. Numerous theatrical magazines were strewn over the floor, interspersed with random pages of typewritten dialogue. It was obviously the home of a person dedicated to the stage. In this case, an aspiring actress.

The actress herself did not fit the picture. In baggy sweatshirt and tight, faded denims rolled to midcalf, Bunny Bailey might have been a schoolgirl struggling over nothing more formidable than her algebra homework. From time to time her bare feet toyed with each other, the pink-tinted toes curling around the rung of her chair. Graphite stained her lips from the continual licking of her stubby pencil, and even the tiny tongue that peeped unconsciously from the corner of her mouth was marked with a dark smudge.

But the business at hand was a far cry from schoolwork. For hours Bunny had been sitting at her desk and poring over the material. She had read and re-read everything that was in any way related to Noah Rudin. And yet—despite her careful study—she had not found what she was looking for.

Heart-sore and buttock-weary, she was about to give up. It was too depressing. Noah Rudin's work presented no problem. She had covered it from beginning to end and she knew it forward, backward and upside-down. But the man himself—ay, there was the rub. What was Noah Rudin really like?

What indeed?

Well, he was in his forties, tall and thin with greying hair, according to his photographs. But that was all she knew about him from a personal angle.

And she just couldn't think of any further source of information.

Oh, she might have probed Kirsten a bit after the blazing finish of their afternoon session. But somehow it hadn't seemed like the right thing to do. Especially since Kirsten was well aware that she had been conned into offering that precious invitation.

Okay, if not Kirsten, who? Tecla?

It was a possibility, and Bunny gave it some thought. Perhaps she should phone Tecla and give it a try. But she'd have to be damn cagey about it—there was always the chance that Tecla herself might have a similar professional interest in Rudin. It was far-fetched, true—after all, Tecla Sheffield was a model, not an actress. But you could never tell these days; recently a number of girls had made the leap from modeling to the theatre. Although most of them, it seemed, leaned toward the movies rather than the stage.

Oh, the hell with it. She couldn't call Tecla either.

Tecla would want the whole story of how she had made out with Kirsten Osgood. Of how the invitation had been earned. And going into details about it just didn't seem like a smart idea.

For one thing, Tecla smoked pot and it made her talk too damn much. Not that she was a gossip, really, but with a little weed in her, there was no telling what she might say in public. She sounded off at the strangest times. Pot—*ugh!* Tecla could have it. Any actress that got hooked on the weed was only looking for trouble. Booze was bad enough, but at least it was legal.

All right, so the necessary information just wasn't available. She couldn't get it from Kirsten or from Tecla. And she just wasn't on friendly terms with anyone else who was even close to the Big Daddy of Broadway.

Big Daddy? Now what had made her think of that? Noah Rudin was tall and thin and beardless; he didn't even look like a *Big Daddy*. And yet there was something in that face, a face lined with experience and wisdom, which managed to convey exactly that impression.

Oh well, whatever he was like, it was too late to do anything about it now. It was time to bathe and dress for the party. Time to get all niced-up and pretty for Big Daddy. She would just have to play it by ear.

Anyway, she usually did her best thinking in the bathtub. Maybe an idea would come to her. She needed a gimmick, any kind of gimmick that would set her apart from the rest of the mob. She had to make herself unique in Noah Rudin's eyes.

But how?

She rose and started to clean up the helter-skelter mess on the desk and in the rest of the room. A few moments' work brought a semblance of order out of the chaos; three more minutes and she had the roaring gush of hot water pyramiding a liberal dollop of bath-crystals into a nebula of aromatic foam.

In the bedroom she pulled the closet-door open and scanned the rack of clothing, a

puzzled frown on her face. Somehow nothing seemed appropriate—she just didn't feel in the mood for the basic black that every other girl would undoubtedly be wearing. The women at a party for Noah Rudin were bound to be pretty spectacular, and it would be murder to compete with them on their own terms.

No, not murder. Suicide.

Sure, she looked good in black. Every woman did. But the longlegged, bosomy ones looked even better. It was that air of poise and sophistication that did it. And she was just enough of an actress to recognize an unsuitable role when she saw it.

Still undecided, Bunny shed the sweatshirt and denims and peeled off the knit-cotton briefs, her single undergarment. Naked, she appeared a slim young colt, a teenager whose only interest in life should have been her first romantic crush. Her customary theatrical manner, practically second nature by now, was temporarily jettisoned and it lay on the desk in the other room, sandwiched between playscripts beneath the Stanislavski.

Deep in thought, she plopped down upon the edge of the bed, leaning back upon her elbows. A group of stuffed mannequins sat demurely propped against the headboard; two of them lost balance and tumbled toward the indentation caused by her sprawled body. In turn, she picked each up to fondle its pliant figure and tenderly reshape the knotted limbs. For a sweet and poignantly nostalgic moment she was one of them, a nude figurine, larger and more lifelike, but nonetheless merely a doll, an image of reality.

A muffled trill of delight escaped her lips. She moved from the bed back to the open closet in a frisky hop-skip-and-jump, her face beaming. She had it now; the clothing problem was solved. She knew what to wear for Big Daddy.

Oh yes, *exactly* what to wear . . .

All niced-up and pretty—funny how the phrase had popped into her mind a little while ago. All niced up and pretty, an expression she hadn't heard since she was a little girl. Well, there was the answer. That was what she would be tonight. A little girl. Just the way she had felt a moment ago, playing those childish games with her dolls. A little girl. And if Noah Rudin had any sensitivity at all, he would know how to make the most of her costume and characterization.

She hoped they were around, the clothes she wanted. She hadn't worn them for a long time and they were probably tucked away with all the other out-of-season things. The ruffled pink panties. The shoes with the cross-strap and low heels, Mary-Jane-shoes she used to call them. The pink shirtwaist frock, the one with the Peter Pan collar edged in frilly lace.

A hair ribbon? Well, maybe not. Maybe it would be too much. Besides, where would she find one or even a reasonable substitute at this late hour? It would be difficult enough to locate all those other items, let alone such a quaint relic of bygone days as a hair-ribbon. Anyway, she'd better get moving. The bathtub would be running over soon.

But the little girl outfit—oh, it would really be worth it. All those latter-day Jezebels with their false eyelashes fluttering and their painted mouths hanging open. The elegant ones in their towering heels and flesh-hugging sheaths. It would be worth it to see the shocked looks on their vapid faces.

Then, as she raced around pawing through bureau drawers in frantic urgency, an odd thought struck home and stopped her short for one flashing instant of insight. Such excitement, such delirium—and somehow it all had nothing to do with the real reason for going to Kirsten Osgood's place. Strange that she should have lost track of it so easily—the business of being an at-liberty actress fighting tooth and nail to latch onto something good. And stranger still that she didn't even care.

She was a little girl again. A happy little girl dressing for a grown-up party. Getting all niced-up and pretty. And hoping against hope that Big Daddy would turn out to be a nice, kind man.

A nice, kind man who liked little girls.

Chapter 7

SQUARES, Frankie Mann thought, just a bunch of squares trying to sound hip. And all doing the big-shot bit, dropping names all over the joint and freeloading the sauce like there was no tomorrow. Yeah, they were the squarest.

Damn good thing he had brought a little pot along, not much but enough to last the night. Ordinarily he wouldn't have been carrying the stuff; it was too dangerous these days with the newspapers running stories about addicts and pushers and that kind of crud. You could get busted just for a couple of bennies or dexies—anything stronger and they'd really throw the book at you.

But he'd figured it about right. He was safe here. No fuzz was going to come prowling among these legitimate characters. Not among people like Noah Rudin and Kirsten Osgood. And what the hell, playing piano for a bunch of patronizing squares was a drag if there ever was one; a guy deserved a little poke on the weed now and then.

The hands that slid over his shoulders from behind gave him a small jolt, but then he got a whiff of the perfume and filled out the chord sequence without skipping a beat. The intimate breath in his ear was warm and comforting. And familiar.

"Frankie, you're doing great," Tecla whispered. "Rudin is digging you like crazy."

"Yeah?"

"Later on I want you to play some of your own things. I want him to hear the originals."

"Yeah? What for?"

"Do you have to ask? You know what for. Just play, Frankie—let me handle everything else."

"Okay, so I'm playing. Like I'm the unpaid help, huh?"

"Don't get salty. You want a drink?"

"Thanks, no. I've got a good thing going, baby. A drink would only slaughter it."

"Oh? Mine is all worn off."

"Too bad, glamor-girl. What did you do with the pair of sticks I gave you this afternoon?"

"What do you think I did? I used them."

"How come? I thought you had a dinner date with Hal Greener. Don't tell me you've got him—"

"No. Nothing like that. I stood him up and went home. The mood was too nice to lose."

"Like solo?"

"Uh-huh. Frankie, it's terrific pot."

"Sure, it is. I told you, didn't I? Hey, I'll bet Greener was mad about it, huh?"

"Of course. He came here drunk. Practically staggering—and all because of me. But he'll get over it. Frankie, I hate to be a pig about it, but give me the word. You holding?"

"Could be."

Her hands slipped around to his throat. "Your tie is crooked. Want me to straighten it?"

"Yeah, straighten it."

She made a pretense of adjusting the knot in his necktie.

"You know me, Frankie-boy—evil on lush and high on tea. I'm tired of booze. How are you fixed for blades?"

"I get the message. Loud and clear. Shirt pocket, left side. One only, baby, I've got the shorts. So don't leave me up the creek without a paddle."

"Okay, one only." Her eager fingers sought the cache. She palmed a reefer from the designated pocket and brought her hand back up, hesitating at the tie for a final feigned adjustment. "Thanks, Frankie, I sure appreciate it. See you later. Greener's got his beady little eyes on every move I make."

"Enjoy, enjoy."

She flashed him a smile and drifted away, and he couldn't help but feel a wave of admiration come over him. Some chick, that Tecla. What the hell, maybe she was right about the music bit; maybe this Noah Rudin wheel was an okay-guy. Anyway, it certainly wouldn't hurt to find out.

Frankie hunched over the keyboard and tried to pick up the interrupted mood. But it was gone now and he couldn't quite get loose with so much noise in the room. The damn place sounded like a henhouse with a wolf at the door.

In back of him, around the free-form mosaic cocktail-table, they were lapping up the lush and splitting their sides listening to the fag comedian. A smart kid, that little faggot—a second-rater maybe, but he wasn't letting it bother him any. Ten-to-one the closest he'd ever been to the Copa was a table in the rear, but he was coming on like he'd been the headliner. The clever swish was dropping names with the best of them and needling everybody in sight,

including Kirsten Osgood and her plushy pad.

"And the bathroom," the guy was saying. "How about that? Submarine lighting in the bathtub. Real class."

Frankie hit a set of closing chords and swung around to listen. It was a wrong move—the sudden silence stood out like a Salvation Army tambourine in a cathouse parlor.

"Play, man, play," the fag comic said. "I need the background music. And not just on the white keys, play the black ones, too. Boy, ain't you been integrated yet?"

Frankie grinned good-naturedly and went back to his musical chore. If he was going to be needled, he might as well relax with the scene and look pleasant. And he was being needled, all right. But he really didn't mind. He felt pretty good. The weed was working fine and all was right with the world.

So he really couldn't find it in himself to criticize Tecla for bringing him here. Square as this crowd was, the chicks were pretty terrific and even the faggoty guys looked like ready-cash. Maybe she had the right idea after all, maybe it would do him some good to make a few uptown contacts for a change.

Sure, the sound was still the thing, the good sound that was everything in any musician's life. He wasn't going to let anybody twist his way of thinking about that. But with the price of decent pot zooming sky-high it was about time he figured out how to make the sound and get paid for it, too. What the hell, the stuff he was playing was right up there with the best. So why shouldn't he take a helping hand from some guy who could get him heard in a few of the right places?

Some guy like Noah Rudin, maybe.

Yeah, it looked like it was going to be quite an interesting night. He only hoped his immediate supply of pot would hold out. It would be a hell to be left high and dry. Sure, he had enough for himself. But he hadn't figured on Tecla. And she was bound to be back for more before this clambake was ended. Once she got started, she just couldn't stop—not until the cupboard was bare.

Yeah. He should have known. Pot was Tecla's life. All she cared about, really. Beautiful and sexy as she was, the only thing that seemed to matter to her was the weed. Nothing else affected her. Not even sex, dammit.

Like this afternoon, for instance. There they were, going at it hot and heavy—and right in the middle she had to stop and take a little puff of pot. And then afterward, standing up Hal Greener and burning those two fat sticks all by herself. That was no way to use the stuff.

Sometimes he actually wished he'd never turned her on in the first place. If she kept at it the way she was, the kid would really be hooked.

Still, he had to hand it to her. Stoned or not, Tecla was the most beautiful woman in the place. And the way she walked, with that regal carriage of hers—well, not a soul would ever know if she was high. Or what she was high on, anyway. She looked better on the weed than the rest of them did on booze.

And if she did come back for another share of the goodies, he knew he'd never be able to turn her down. After all, if it hadn't been for Tecla he wouldn't even be here. And much as he hated to admit it, he was beginning to dig this crowd. Maybe he was missing something, hanging around in the Village and playing for crumbs who didn't have a dime to their names. He just hadn't realized it before.

But his eyes were open now. Wide open. Yeah, this was the way to live, all right.

Chapter 8

THEY sat and they drank. And they chattered. Yackety-yackety-yackety-yack—voices rose and fell in quickening tempo, achieving maximum acceleration and minimum intelligibility. Half the group talked at once, the other half not troubling to listen but remaining silent only to ransack their own brains for some scintillating *bon mot* to hold ready in case of an opportune gap in the wall of noise. It was standard procedure among show people.

Kirsten Osgood drank and nodded in general agreement with the world. Once or twice she tried to crack the sound barrier herself, but her timing was faulty and the carefully-culled quip never got off the ground. Unruffled, she settled back to alcoholic quietness, mildly displeased with her own temerity in having made the attempt. Humor—especially of the risqué variety—was just not her strong point. She had no talent for the off-color drollery that was so popular among the party-party set.

No flair whatsoever, at least in that particular direction, and she had long since faced that realization. And as for her one true talent, well, it was a workday thing and it didn't do her much good in a *strictly* social situation. Except, of course, that nothing was *strictly* social in this theatre-oriented clique.

Far from it. Other than Noah Rudin, who was already at the top, all these people—or mostly all, anyway—never really stopped scrambling for position on the ladder to success. So in its own way, Kirsten knew, her solitary claim to near-genius stood her in good stead even here on a non-working Sunday night. It rated her a good deal of respect. She was a scenic designer, a damn good one, and everybody knew it. It definitely helped to gloss over the fact that she couldn't amuse an audience with dirty jokes like so many of the others could. Ostensibly she was the quiet type, the kind who did more drinking than talking, and she was glad to be accepted as such.

Except for the drinking. She could feel the boozy haze sneaking upon her already and it was too early in the night for it. If she didn't slow down she'd be plastered soon and she couldn't afford the luxury of passing out at her own party. All the more so since her boss was among those present. It wouldn't be smart to look foolish in front of Noah.

But what was a girl to do? The affair was going nicely and needed no supervision from her. Food and liquor were laid out in quantity so that the guests could help themselves—which they did, regularly and often, with no hostess-like persuasion necessary. Consequently, with no administrative duties to perform, it was easy to sit with a drink in her hand and get quietly blotto.

Entirely *too* easy, dammit.

Because tonight of all nights, she needed something to carry her through the personal depression she was wading in. Even in the middle of the feverish festivities she was alone and unwanted. Nobody loved poor Kirsten—that was the way she felt and without the glow of alcohol she'd never get over it. And the reason was so painfully obvious that she wondered if everybody in the place wasn't smirking up their respective sleeves at her.

The reason—Tecla Sheffield.

Oh, if she could get that beautiful bitch alone she'd strangle her with great glee. She'd wrap her hands around that pretty neck and squeeze and squeeze until there was no life left in the cold, cruel heart that beat beneath that gorgeous bosom. She'd kill her, that's what she would do.

Would she? Hah! Fat chance. And there was no sense kidding herself about it, either. It was more likely that she would fall on her knees and kiss Tecla's feet and beg for the privilege of making love to that marvelous body once more.

Only she'd never get the opportunity. Never again. Tecla had said so, in no uncertain terms. Their romance was over. The girl had played around at being gay and had found it not to her liking. Or at least not enough to continue in the same vein. Tecla had gone straight again and was no longer intrigued by the exotic joys of the lesbian kick.

Kirsten flushed in embarrassment at the recollection. She had pleaded with Tecla—oh, how she had pleaded! But in the end it hadn't done a damn bit of good. And now tonight Tecla was here not with one man but *two*. That stuffy Wall Street dolt, Hal Greener. And the seedy-mustached pianist called Frankie who looked like a beatnik who had put on a clean shirt for the occasion. Two ardent swains—that was really rubbing salt in the bleeding wound.

So what else was a girl to do but get drunk?

Nothing else, dammit. Nothing to do but get stinko and forget Tecla. There were other fish in the sea.

Fish?

Kirsten managed a weak grin. It was a rather insulting term in the present-day campy slang. But tonight it was appropriate. So many of the girls here were gay—she had seen to that when she issued the invitations. Not only because she preferred it that way but because she knew it would amuse Noah. He got a charge out of seeing girls making passes at girls.

And those who weren't gay were practically all AC-DC—again to keep the boss happy. If the party got wild later on, Noah would have no difficulty finding some cute doll to warm his aging bones. Although it was doubtful whether Noah would be interested tonight.

He had brought a date with him, the girl he had been seeing on and off for the past month or so, and he wasn't likely to let such a creature slip through his fingers. Lilith Devereaux was an absolute dream—with the same dark hair and sultry look that Tecla had. Better yet, Lilith had plenty of money and wasn't fawning over him in hopes of a show-business break. So it was highly improbable that Noah would cast her adrift to wallow in some kind of mass orgiastic activity. Not unless some other girl struck his fancy.

And that was dubious, Kirsten knew, dubious to say the least. Although it would certainly be great if things did work out that way. Forgetting Tecla would be a lot easier with someone like Lilith Devereaux available. The lovely thing didn't look gay, of course, but you never could tell in this day and age.

Lilith Devereaux. Just thinking about her was a thrill. Yes, that was the kind of girl to fall in love with. And to be loved by. But not for a hit-and-run fling. Oh, no. It would be wonderful to entice such a dreamboat into a permanent relationship.

Entice? Oh sure . . .

Morosely, Kirsten got up to replenish her drink. She couldn't entice anybody into anything, dammit. Except for the show-biz kids, of course, and they were only using her in hopes of getting ahead. They all wanted sponsorship, not love. And she was getting goddam sick and tired of it. It was time she found someone who would love her for herself—*for herself alone*—and not for what she could do to further a theatrical career. Someone like Lilith Devereaux who didn't give a hang about becoming an actress.

But there was only one Lilith Devereaux—and that one was already spoken for. By Noah Rudin, of all people.

Kirsten sighed sadly and started drinking again. No, she couldn't very well compete with her own boss. She would just have to be satisfied with what she could get. The hungry ones hoping for a break. Like that blonde Bunny Bailey.

Now *there* was a pathetic creature. Bunny. What had ever possessed the poor thing to

come dressed like that? In a childish pink dress and those silly low-heeled shoes. Sure, every woman tried to look younger than her years, but how young could a girl get? What was she trying to play—another Lolita?

Hmm, perhaps she was. She was playing *something*, at any rate, frisking around like that and clambering up on Noah's lap every now and then. She acted like a kid at a birthday party. And the way she was dressed, she actually almost seemed like one.

But little Bunny was no longer an interesting prospect, Kirsten was aware. In a pinch, maybe if there was no one else on tap. But aside from such extenuating circumstances, last night plus their tussle that afternoon had been enough.

Feeling the liquor more and more, she glanced around in quest of a possible bed-partner for later on. And then, abruptly, she realized that Tecla was no longer in the room. The dark beauty must have gone to check her hairdo and freshen her makeup; she was overly meticulous about her appearance.

Over on the sectional sofa Noah Rudin was talking and the general commotion had simmered down somewhat. Noah was a listener and he didn't have much to say, but when he spoke everybody shut up and gave their rapt attention. For obvious reasons.

Someone had mentioned the old Prohibition days, and Noah had picked up on it. "You youngsters don't know," he was saying. "Of course, I was just a high-school kid myself, but I can damn sure remember how it was. Sad. Very sad." His tone was grave. "Prohibition made you want to cry in your beer and then denied you the very beer to cry into."

A howl of laughter went up. The gag wasn't that funny, Kirsten thought, but no one was taking any chances. It seemed like a good moment to make an exit, and in the midst of the hullaballoo she sneaked out of the room unnoticed.

She checked the other rooms one by one, and there were plenty to check. Living on the unfashionable West Side had *some* advantages, anyway—the rents were lower and the apartments bigger. No doubt about it, she could certainly make some girl comfortable here. Some nice sweet girl who loved her enough to want to move in with her. If such a person existed.

In one of the bedrooms Tecla was standing in front of the mirror and working on her makeup. Kirsten stepped in quietly and twisted the lock on the door. On tiptoe she moved close and put her hands on Tecla's shoulders.

"Oh! You startled me." Without turning around, Tecla smiled into the mirror and continued with her task. "What brings you here? Same as me? Makeup?"

"Frankly, no. I want to talk to you."

"Uh-huh. Go ahead and talk. But please don't hold my arms like that. I'll never get this eye-shadow on right."

Reluctantly, Kirsten took her hands away. Her palms tingled from the soft warmth. "Tecla, why are you so mean to me? You know how I feel about you."

"Kirsten, please. Don't start that business all over again. We thrashed it out completely, didn't we?"

"Not completely."

"No? What else is there to say?"

"Nothing, perhaps. But I've got a feeling everything isn't all over between us, Tecla. If it were, you wouldn't even be here tonight, would you?"

"Oh . . ."

"Well? Why did you come?"

"That's fairly simple, isn't it? You invited me and I accepted. Sure, it was before we broke up, but I certainly assumed the invitation still stands. After all, Hal Greener is involved, too. You knew I had a date with him to come here."

"Hmph! Greener. He came in loaded to the gills and he hasn't sobered up since. I think he's going to be sick."

"Don't worry, he won't mess up the rug. And if he does, I'm sure he'll clean it up."

"Uh-huh. That's all I need. But how about the other one, Tecla? The piano player. Did he have to come, too?"

"Frankie? Oh, he's harmless. And he's keeping everybody happy with his music, isn't he? The guy is good."

"That's the third time I've heard you say that tonight. You keep telling everyone how good he is. Everyone, including Noah Rudin. And don't think I haven't noticed."

"So? Rudin thinks he's good, too."

"Dammit, you're just using me, that's all."

"Using you? In what way?"

"Oh, you know. Just the way everybody else does. Or at least the way they try to."

"Kirsten, that's ridiculous. I want to go on being your friend, but if you say things like—"

"Forget it. I'm sorry. Case closed. Okay?"

"Okay."

"So which one do you really like? Greener or the piano player? And don't get mad—I'm

just asking out of curiosity."

Tecla giggled. "Ask all you like. As a matter of fact, I'm just as curious as you are."

"You don't know? Honey, that means you really don't care for either one of them."

"It's possible. So what?"

"Well, don't you see? If you can't make up your mind, you're just not in love. Isn't that so?"

"Kirsten, who said anything about love?"

"Oh. But I thought—"

"You thought wrong. I didn't break off with you because of Hal or Frankie. I experimented with the gay kick for a while and then I got tired of it, that's all. But I've already told you that, Kirsten. Why do we have to rake up the dead ashes again?"

"I wish they were dead."

"Hmm? Who? Frankie and Hal?"

"No. Of course not although maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea. But I meant the ashes. The ashes of our love. Yours may be dead, but mine aren't. There's a fire burning inside me."

"Well, now. Pretty melodramatic, aren't you, Kirsten? Dead ashes and burning fires. A bit on the cornball side, I'd say. But then I'm no expert on the subject of histrionics and such. I leave that to you theatre people."

Kirsten felt foolish. Her recitation *had* been corny. Word for word, it might have been spouted in some old warhorse of a show out of the Belasco era. The booze was making her woozy, dammit. If she didn't get a grip on herself she'd be doing *East Lynne* next.

Only it wasn't just the liquor. It was the overpowering effect that Tecla had on her. It made her dizzy to be so close to all that perfume-scented voluptuous flesh and not be allowed to touch it. Her knees were turning weak; her hands clenched and unclenched. The agony was unbearable.

"There. I guess that does it." Tecla took a step backward and peered at her reflection with critical eyes. "Um, no. My hair isn't quite right. Or is it?"

But Kirsten was in no position to answer. Or even to judge. Her limbs gave way and she slumped to the floor.

"Hey," Tecla said. "What are you—"

"I love you." On her knees, Kirsten moved around in front of the gracefully posed body. Her fingers grasped the exquisitely molded thighs. "Don't you understand? I love you."

"Silly. Come now, get up."

"I love you."

"Please, Kirsten. Someone might open the door."

"I locked it."

"Oh? Well, aren't you clever." Tecla giggled. But she was already working on her few loose strands of hair as if nothing else held any interest for her.

Kirsten moaned. Blindly, she leaned close and her avid hands went up under Tecla's dress. The skirt folded upon itself like an accordion and then, miraculously, there was no barrier between her face and those delectable thighs.

Again, Tecla giggled.

The perfume was intoxicating. Overwhelmed, Kirsten pressed her flushed cheeks against the ivory-tinted flesh. It seemed to engulf her in an all-encompassing caress. The sensation was pure ecstasy. Her lips parted and glided upward in ever-burgeoning fervor. The silken texture of the soft skin was an alluring temptation too great to comprehend. Stark need tugged at her vitals and she felt an invisible net of passion enmesh her in its toils. She had to have this girl. Even if it was for the last time, she had to make love to this tantalizing, sweet-scented body to the ultimate degree.

"That's better," Tecla murmured. But her voice was cool and composed and distant. It was apparent that she was still engrossed in her hairdo. "Is there any spray? Oh, yes." One foot took a sideward step as she reached for something on the dresser.

Kirsten gasped at the seductive movement of the silken legs. Suddenly caught up in the raging holocaust of her own lust, her lips besieged and her tongue tasted and her brain reeled.

A hiss sounded from above as Tecla maneuvered the can of hair-lacquer. Once, Twice. Three times. And then again as the rather commonplace gesture was performed for a final time. A shudder seized Kirsten's kneeling form. She was making love to what might have been an inanimate statue. The girl was so nonchalant. So unconcerned. So wrapped up in the mundane activity of adding embellishments to her own beauty.

Oh, but it wasn't a statue, and Kirsten couldn't help herself. It didn't matter now whether this magnificent body was even aware of her caresses. Her blood raced. Her pulses throbbed. She was too far gone to do anything but continue.

There was a barrier now. An obstacle. Panties—black and sheer and gauzy to the point of being tissue-thin. But a barrier nonetheless, and Kirsten gave vent to a sob of frustration.

It couldn't end here. It just couldn't. Timidly, then boldly, her fingers sought the waistband. Found it. And then began to tug the wispy garment down.

"Having fun?" Tecla said.

Kirsten tensed.

"Sorry to interrupt." The girl's tone was indifferent. Almost insolent. She set the spray-can down on the dresser and pulled her panties back into place. A backward pace took her out of Kirsten's reach and the dress hemline dropped to its proper position. "I hope you didn't wrinkle it."

"Tecla . . ."

"No, it's not bad." She smoothed the skirt with her palms. "It's not an expensive frock either. Wonderful what they can do these days with synthetic materials."

"Tecla . . . please . . . darling . . ."

"Oh, stop it. Get up, will you? You've had a little fun, but that's all you're going to get." Tecla revolved slowly, watching her image in the mirror. "Well, how do I look?"

"I love you . . ."

"Uh-huh. Come now, get up. You look ridiculous kneeling there like that."

"Please. Tecla, don't. I *love* you."

"And I love you, dear. I love Paris in the spring. And autumn in New York and foggy days in London Town. I love you and Frankie and Hal and all the nice people at your party. Really I do. You must invite me again some time."

Kirsten collapsed in a huddled heap. She heard the lock turn. The door opened and then closed. She knew she had to get up from the floor before someone came in and saw her like this. But it was a long time before she found the strength.

Chapter 9

Noah Rudin sipped his drink. It was a tall one—light on the Scotch and heavy on the soda. Very mild and deliberately so. It was his third, if he remembered rightly, and he was just beginning to feel it a little bit.

Which was fine. Nearly everyone else was ahead of him in the booze department; they were swallowing the stuff like mad and some of them weren't even bothering to read the labels on the bottles any more. But he knew how to handle his liquor—as a man of his years should. Taken in great quantity, alcohol was a depressant; in small doses it was a pleasant stimulant. And he was too wise to gain any enjoyment in the process of getting maudlin drunk.

Besides, there was his rather unique position to take into consideration. Everybody was being nice to him—as usual in this kind of gathering—and it didn't take much brainwork to figure out why. Some of these kids were mighty sharp, too, so he had to keep his wits about him or they'd be wheedling the shirt right off his back. Not that they wanted his shirt—oh no—not unless there was an Equity contract printed on the shirttail.

No, he couldn't get stoned and take the chance of breaking out in rash promises. Once, right after his first Broadway hit—it seemed like a generation ago now—he had gone to bed with an innocent damsel and awakened with a damn ingenue on his hands. So young. So tender. And yet hard-boiled enough to hold him to his word and get his signature on the document.

Oh, he didn't regret it. Not that one. Luckily, she turned out to be a competent actress, and to this very day she still appeared in a Noah Rudin production now and then. Only she wasn't an ingenue any longer, of course, but a slightly-aging leading-lady. And pretty soon she'd be doing elderly character parts.

Character parts? *That* young thing? Hmm. He was getting old, all right. Had the years slipped by so fast?

They sure as hell had. But he didn't feel old, somehow. Especially tonight. Leave it to Kirsten to gather together a gang like this. She knew his tastes all too well.

No, that wasn't quite true. Dammit, he didn't even know his own tastes, so how could anyone else? Maybe he didn't have a bent in any particular direction, really, at least none that had a much greater appeal than the others. As long as it was different, that was all that actually mattered—different from the standard-brand bedroom routine that would up in a speedy bounce and subsequent boredom.

Yes, he was like Lilith in that way, he figured. She too was intrigued only by out-of-the-ordinary sex. Except that he had never ranged so far and wide in his quest for kicks as she had. After all, he had his business to attend to, and it took a lot of time. While to Lilith the pursuit of offbeat pleasure in itself was practically a full-schedule occupation.

Lilith. Ah yes, he was going to miss those Sunday afternoons. But it was nice that they could switch from lovers to friends with such ease. From the friendliest of lovers to the loveliest of friends. He would treasure her always.

But it was over now, and he couldn't help wishing he might find something really new as quickly as Lilith had. She was having a jolly time tonight flirting with the gay girls. Evidently she had meant what she said this afternoon. Lilith was about to go on a lesbian binge. At least it looked that way.

Oh, he liked the gay kids himself, of course—it was always fun to see them in action. But it was no longer a novelty to him, not after a half-dozen such parties under Kirsten's roof.

Still, he couldn't complain. It was a nice affair. The mob had dispersed somewhat and now there were small knots of chatterers in the various bedrooms. Only they weren't chattering quite so much; the raucous humor had given way to dulcet-toned overtures. Nothing more than that, of course, since it was really up to him to decide whether the party should go hog-wild or not. But the kids in the bedrooms were choosing partners and whispering propositions just in case.

And he had to make his decision soon, he knew. It was necessary to give Kirsten time to organize the thing. The other males, few as they were in number, had to be sent politely packing. Especially the faggots. Flaming queens were fun with their screaming and shouting, but he didn't want them around when the chips were down and the clothing dropped off.

Still, he wasn't sure whether he wanted a wild party or not. Right now he was content to just sit and listen to the piano-player. The guy was okay. A little too complicated and cute for the popular taste but okay just the same. The music was just too many years ahead of its time. But it was nice to hear as a background, anyway, while he pondered the wild party issue.

Lilith appeared from out of the main hallway and he waved her over. Gaily, eyes

sparkling, she curled up next to him on the sofa. Her musky scent tickled his nostrils and once again he regretted their mutual parting of the ways.

"Well?" he said.

"Well, what?"

"How are you doing? Find what you're looking for?"

"I'm still looking, Noah. Although I don't have to look very hard, I'll admit. I never saw such a bunch of eager-beavers. And most of them don't even look gay."

"How about Kirsten? Interested?"

"Umm, a little. But she's pretty drunk. And weepy-eyed about something, I think. I like her, though. She's older than the others and has more experience. More of the butchy type too."

Noah nodded. "Kirsten knows her way around. East Side, West Side and the Village, she knows the lezzie crowd."

"I gathered that. I figure she'd be a good one to start with. To get my feet wet, you might say."

"Your feet?"

"Well . . ." Lilith chuckled. "Still, it's too early to tell. It's all so new to me. Which makes it all the more exciting, of course. But Kirsten is so darn moody tonight. Is she always like that?"

"No. But you don't have to make up your mind, you know. Maybe you'd rather see her in action first. Better yet, maybe you'd like to be the center of the action yourself."

"Huh? Noah, I don't get it."

"Kind of a free-for-all wrestling match, I mean. All girls. With you in the middle."

"Is that possible?"

"Sure. It's up to you, Lilith. Or to me, rather. I'm Kirsten's boss, remember? So if that's what you'd like, it's no problem. All I have to do is give her the word and away we go." He made the Jackie Gleason gesture, "What do you say?"

"I don't know . . ."

"Well, think about it."

"I will. Don't worry, it's the kind of thing I've been thinking about all night, one way or another." Lilith glanced toward the hall. "Oh, brother. Here she comes again. The little one. She's really after you tonight."

A mock groan issued from Noah's lips. "Yeah. And me without an aspidistra to hide behind."

Bright-eyed and bouncing with each step, Bunny Bailey had rounded the corner from the hallway and caught sight of them. She came part way into the living room and waved. "Hi, Big Daddy," she trilled, preening herself like a naïve child with a Narcissus complex.

"Hi," he said gruffly.

"No smile?" she called. "No smile for your little girl?"

Noah smiled dutifully.

"Oooh, you smile pretty." Bunny beamed. "But I can't stop now. When you gotta go, you gotta go." She patted her tummy meaningfully. "But don't forget—you and I are going to have a nice long chat later on." Without waiting for a reply, she whirled and skipped away, the pink frock, now rumpled and liquor-stained, flouncing frothily about her slim thighs.

"Praise Allah," Noah said, shaking his head. "A reprieve. Execution postponed."

"Why, Big Daddy, I'm surprised at you." Lilith's piping voice was pitched in exact duplication of Bunny's childish treble. "You know you like it."

"I do? Honey, it's news to me. I ought to take her over my knee and whang the daylights out of her. The damfool dame has been getting in my hair all night."

"It's your seamed and aging face. It fascinates her."

"No doubt," Noah muttered drily. "Believe it or not, she claims she's an actress."

"She is."

"Yeah? In what? Punch and Judy shows?"

"Noah, I'm serious. You may be the wizard of show business, but I think I recognize something extraordinary when I see it. She's acting right now."

"You call that acting?"

"Of course. And she's doing a damn good job of it. She's far from being a youngster and yet she gives that impression, doesn't she? She's actually living her part, and it's really coming across. Isn't that what they call the Method School of Acting?"

He shrugged. "I suppose so. So what is this, a try-out for a part? With the scripts I've got under option, I'm not looking for anybody to play kid roles."

"Oh, that's secondary. Getting a part, I mean. Or at least that's what I think. She's after *you* now. You, personally. And I've got a hunch she's going to get you."

"Over my dead body!"

"That's a possibility, too," Lilith said, smiling. "Admit it, Big Daddy, you're hooked."

"Wrong, baby. No broad that comes on like an over-age Lolita is going to con me. You know what she's got on underneath that goddam pink dress?" He snorted. "Bloomers, that's

what. So help me, she's wearing bloomers. With ruffles, yet."

Lilith exhaled a languid sigh. "Hmm, I guess that creates a small problem."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Don't you know? The spanking, naturally. When you take her over your knee, will you whack her over the bloomers or will you pull them down to half-mast?"

"Baby, you're balmy."

"Maybe. But this happens to be right in my line." Lilith uncoiled her body and sat up straight, apparently activated by this new conversational facet. "I'm the girl who knows the ins-and-outs of sex, isn't that so? Well, this particular little quirk is something I've run into before. In fact, I knew a guy who tried to fit me into the picture just that way. Not my dish of tea, though."

"Okay, so you know all about sex. So fill me in, will you? Or is it a trade secret."

"I'll fill you in. I'd better. Because it'll be a busted romance unless you find out just how Little Miss Bloomers wants Big Daddy to treat her."

Noah growled. "Hah! Busted romance."

"You don't want to know? You're not curious?"

"Okay, I'm curious, I'm curious."

"Then be still and let me talk. First of all, it's a kick. A sex kick. Actually, it's a form of masochism on the girl's part, I mean. She wants to visualize you as an older man, much older than herself. So she acts like a little girl, and to her you become her Big Daddy. It's exciting to her."

"And that makes her a masochist?"

"Of course. Good grief, Noah, don't think sadism and masochism have to do only with whipping and torture. There are many forms. In this one, the little girl wants to be spanked. No, that's not it exactly. She hates the idea of a spanking. She's afraid of it, just as any real child would be. But it arouses her sexually to be punished for being naughty. Remember, the spanking itself isn't sexual, it's supposed to be a corrective chastisement. But she'll go out of her way to get you to give it to her. She'll tease and act up all over the place. Anything to irritate you. Anything to make you annoyed enough to grab her and toss her over your knee. Do I make sense?"

"Some. Okay, so she gets me peeved and I spank her. So then what happens?"

Lilith shrugged, "That's up to you. You're her Big Daddy, aren't you? She belongs to you. You can do anything you like with her, just so long as you stay within the fantasy. You must

always be the stern but kindly man in charge of disciplining her. There, now. You've heard the opinion of an expert. Only it's more than merely an opinion, it's a positive fact. Believe me, I know."

"Well, I'll be damned."

"Uh-huh. But that's not the issue. We'll all be damned, sooner or later. That's what we get for leading such wicked lives. But how about the little girl kick? Are you intrigued?"

"I'm not sure. I'll think about it."

"Do, Noah, by all means. Anyway, it's your turn to mull over decisions. I've already reached mine."

"Oh? Oh, that. The party-party. Well?"

"I'm for it. All the way. So give the word or whatever it is you're supposed to do. I'm ready and waiting. As a matter-of-fact, I'm getting slightly steamed up over the prospect."

"Uh-huh. Well, keep your pants on, baby." He grinned. "Literally *and* figuratively, I mean. It'll take Kirsten a little time to get the thing organized."

"All right." She wriggled in a seductive show of impatience. "But get her to hurry, will you? I'm getting goose-bumps just thinking about it."

Chapter 10

THE knob on the bathroom door rattled and twisted, but its built-in locking device held firm. Tecla smiled appreciatively—locks were nice; with a flick of the finger they shut out inquisitive eyes and gave you a chance to be alone and get re-acquainted with yourself.

And puff a little pot.

The knob jiggled again, this time with vigor. In defiance, Tecla blew the thin marijuana haze from her lungs upon its metallic surface. There now—smoked locks, just like the old days at home in Brooklyn. Lox with cream cheese and bagels, momma?

Once more, the persistent doorknob made its protest—the fifth attempt in four minutes? The fourth in five minutes? On pot you couldn't tell; you never knew when thirty ticks on a jeweled watch might expand into a happy hour in your weed-fogged mind. Maybe that was why it was illegal—nobody would keep business appointments. Or dinner dates.

"Go away," she said. "Write your congressman."

"Tecla?"

Damn! Her sins had found her out. "Okay, don't break the door down. Hold it a minute."

"It's Bunny. Let me in."

Thank God for small favors. The stick was down to roach-size, not enough to share and too precious to throw away. Bunny Bailey, a non-smoker, would want none of it, luckily, but neither would she play the horrified conscientious-objector.

Tecla opened the door, let her in and then relocked it. "Sink or john?"

"So it shouldn't be a total loss—both. No rush, though. Don't get up." Bunny stood in front of the medicine-cabinet mirror and fluffed out her yellow hair with deft fingers. "As a matter of fact, I was looking for you."

"You knew where to look." Carefully, Tecla placed the tiny marijuana-butt on the shelf above the wash-stand, then began rummaging through her handbag.

Bunny looked at the butt and sniffed, wrinkling her nose. "Pot. I thought so. The stuff stinks."

"But it stinks so good. Good, good, good."

"Honey, you're stoned. Where did you get it?"

"My grandmother grows it. In a window box." Tecla found a pack of filter-tip cigarettes in her purse and shook one out. She started rolling the end between her fingers, softening the tightly-packed tobacco. "She's got a green thumb."

"You're just teasing me."

"Ask a foolish question, you'll get a foolish answer. Were you really looking for me?"

"Yes, I was." Bunny stared down at the manipulation of the cigarette, a puzzled expression on her face. "But first would you mind telling me what the devil you're doing with that thing? Or am I asking another foolish question."

"I'm making a cocktail. Watch." Tecla pulled a small wad of loosened tobacco-shreds out, leaving an empty half-inch in the end of the paper tube. She plucked the marijuana-butt from the shelf and stuffed it into the cylindrical hollow, then gave the paper a gentle spiral twirl to seal the opening. "Voilà." She held the finished product up for Bunny's inspection. "A cocktail."

Bunny stared quizzically. "Is that what it's called? You don't waste a thing, do you?"

"Only my time." Tecla struck a match and touched it to the cigarette. The twisted paper tip caught fire; she blew it out and took a quick drag from the filter-end, then continued taking in air until she was puffed up like a pouter pigeon.

"Amazing," Bunny said.

Still holding her breath, Tecla nodded. Seconds went by and then she expelled the smoke. Her breathing returned to normal. "Okay, you found me. What's up?"

"Not up. Down. Hal Greener."

"Oh?"

"He's in the small bedroom asking for you. Pretty sick. By now he's probably passed out cold."

"That's my boy," Tecla said. "That's what I like about Hal, he always knows when to quit."

"Well, can you handle him?"

"What for, Bunny? Can't he just sleep it off?"

"We need the room. Anyway, that's what Kirsten says. I think the party is going to get wild."

"Really? With a big wheel like Noah Rudin here?" Bunny avoided a direct answer, shrugging sagely as if she could speak volumes but dared not. "You know what a square Greener is. Suppose he wakes up in the middle of it?"

"Great. It would do him good."

"You know better. We've got to get rid of the body."

"I guess you're right," Tecla said. "And I'm elected?"

"Well, he's your date."

"Uh-huh. Don't rub it in, kiddo."

"So can you do it?"

"Sure. Another poke on this weed and I'll float out the window carrying him on my back."

"Be serious, Tecla. Kirsten wants you to send him on his way. If you need any help, I'll—"

"No. No help. I've seen him like this before. Too damn often, frankly. Once I get him up and out to the elevator he'll be okay. Wring out a cold cloth, will you?"

Bunny turned on the water-faucet and placed a face-towel in the wash-basin. "Oh. One thing more. How about the piano player?"

"Frankie? What about him?"

"Do you think he ought to stay? I mean, well, he doesn't exactly fit in here, does he?"

"I don't see why not. We need music, don't we?"

"Well, does he know the score?"

"Bunny, are you kidding? That's my hip grandmother you're talking about. The one with the green thumb."

"Oh. I guess it'll be all right then. I'll check with Kirsten just to make sure."

"I must say, sweetie, you're quite an operator. What are you, Kirsten's assistant hostess now?"

"No. Well, in a way, yes. She just asked me to talk to you, that's all. I guess she's afraid to do it herself."

"Okay, so you're the assistant hostess. But you're sure as hell not dressed for it. What's with the outfit, Bunny? The pink dress and the flat shoes, I mean."

"This?" Bunny blushed. "Just a crazy notion, that's all."

"Crazy like a fox. Come on, baby, what gives? Has Noah Rudin got some play coming up with a part for a teenage kid?"

"No, not that I know of. I guess I just wanted to look different so he'd take notice of me." Bunny sighed dolorously. "But I'm not doing very well, I'm afraid."

"No? I saw you crawling all over him in the living room a while ago. You were doing okay then."

"I doubt it. I don't even think he likes me." She sighed again, but this time it seemed less

melancholy somehow. "He sure is nice, isn't he?"

"I'll say. The most eligible bachelor in Manhattan. I wouldn't mind getting chummy with him myself."

Bunny pouted prettily. "I hope not. You're too much competition for poor little me. Besides, you've already got a date. Two dates, for that matter."

"Oh sure. Two count 'em—two. But I still wouldn't pass up a crack at Noah Rudin. Anyway, all's fair in love and war. Although I'm not sure which it would be—love or war. Oh well . . ."

Tecla took a last deep lungful of smoke and held her breath. She stood up, lifted the toilet lid and flipped the remainder of the cigarette into the bowl. It hit with a sibilant *sput* and then was swallowed in the gurgling vortex as she pushed the flush-lever. "There. I think I got all the goodie out of that one."

Bunny gave the soaked towel a final squeeze. "Here. Go take care of your ailing boy."

Tecla took it and turned the lock on the doorknob. Halfway out, she paused momentarily, weighing her words in sober speculation. "The wild party—do you figure Rudin will really go for it?"

"Who knows? There's only one way to find out."

"Uh-huh. Well, I think I'll stick around and see. It might be an interesting evening."

Tecla stepped into the hall, pulling the door closed behind her. In the small bedroom Hal Greener was stretched out on the dark red spread, one arm thrown across his eyes as a shield against the ceiling light. She snapped on the shaded bedside lamp and clicked the wall switch, cutting off the glare from overhead.

The arm fell away and his eyelids flickered. "Tecla?" His voice had the rasp of a rusty hinge, and a pronounced pallor had settled upon his normally rubicund features.

"I'm here, Hal. Just hold still a minute." She sat down on the bed gently and laid the wet towel across his furrowed forehead. "There. How does that feel?"

"Nice. If it weren't for this damn headache—"

"Shall I get you some aspirin?"

"No, thanks. I took a couple a little while ago. They didn't help much, though. Everything started to get that tilted look, you know what I mean? And then Kirsten led me in here."

"Hush. Take it easy and rest."

"Uh-huh . . ."

She sat there for a while, turning the cloth over and pressing it down soothingly. Then,

"Feel any better now, dear? In shape to get up and leave?"

"I think so. With a bit of help."

"Come on." Briskly, she rose and took the towel away. "I'll get you into the elevator. You'll be able to locate a cab, all right, once you hit the fresh air."

"Aren't you coming, baby?"

"No, dear. There's something I've got to do first."

"The piano player?"

"Yes. I have to get Noah Rudin to hear some of his original compositions. It might be a break for him."

"Forget it, Tecla. You're coming with me."

"I can't. I promised."

"Okay, so you promised. What the hell, can't the guy take care of himself?" There was an undertone of resistance in his reedy whine. "Just because you knew him when you were a kid and feel sorry for him, do you have to make out like you're his mother?"

"Stop it, Hal. You're getting all worked up over nothing. Anyway, a promise is a promise."

"Okay, okay." He snatched the damp cloth from her hand and slapped it back on his brow with a resounding plop. "If you're not leaving, neither am I. I'll just lie here and suffer."

Tecla smiled. "Aren't you being a trifle ridiculous?"

"Oh sure. Ridiculous is right. That's exactly how I felt sitting in that damn restaurant waiting for you to show up. Why don't you try keeping your promises to me some time?"

"That again, Hal? All right, get it out of your system."

"Don't I wish I could. If you had kept your date like you were supposed to, I wouldn't be groggy right now. All those martinis and then that lousy lobster—"

"Lobster? What were you doing eating lobster? You know it never agrees with you."

"I was drunk. And mad."

"So you went out in the backyard and ate worms." She looked down at him disgustedly. "No wonder you're sick. Lobster. Of all the stupid stunts—"

"Okay, so I was stupid. But I just didn't care. You stood me up and I worried about you. It was a goddam bitchy thing for you to do, Tecla, you've got to admit it."

"Oh, so now I'm a bitch! Is that what you think of me?" Her anger was a sharp scythe slicing through the tuft of resistance that quailed, reedlike, before its flashing blade.

"I didn't mean it that way."

"No? Well, that's what it sounded like."

"Tecla, I give up. When you're in this mood I can't fight you. I'm going home." He swung his legs over the side of the bed and rose to his feet shakily.

"Now you're getting smart. Do you think you can make it?"

"I'll make it. Only I wish you'd come with me."

"No, Hal. I don't even want to discuss it. Come on, I'll see you to the elevator."

"No. I'm okay." Swaying, he placed his hands on her shoulders, his sad red-rimmed eyes like those of an apologetic sheepdog. "Baby, I didn't mean what I said about your getting bitchy. You know that, don't you?"

"Sure, honey, I know it."

"Then you're not angry?"

"Not angry." She brushed her lips against his craggy cheek and nudged him toward the door. "Now I want you to go home and get some sleep. Call me tomorrow."

"I will, baby. Say good-night to the hostess for me. And anyone else that needs saying good-night to."

She followed him through the hall, one arm extended, steering him as if he were a zombie under her control. At the front door he turned to kiss her. With coy grace she held him off and then yielded, cringing inwardly at the suffocating contact of his open mouth. A moment later he was gone and the door was locked behind him and she was leaning against it, limp with relief. Her heart was hammering like a pneumatic drill tearing up a concrete pavement.

For a long time she stood there, hating Hal Greener and hating herself for hating him. Then the sensation passed, and the sound of the piano penetrated her self-torment, bringing a new but delicious torture as it swathed her martyred flesh in a hairshirt of caustic dissonances.

She straightened up and made a beeline for the source. Frankie saw her and nodded happily, the chords mellowing as his concentration on the keyboard slackened.

"I think it's going to be a party-party," she murmured in his ear. "How's your green uncle from Chicago?"

"So soon?"

"Of course not. I'm feeling no pain. I'm just checking for later, that's all. So how's the supply?"

"Oh . . ." Frankie's right hand probed his shirt pocket, the left hand moving into a walking-bass figure that sustained the fullness of the sound by itself. "Not good," he said. "Not good."

Tecla's face fell.

"But not bad either. Cheer up, glamor-puss, we'll get by."

Chapter 11

BUNNY BAILEY adjusted the folds of her childish frock and repainted her lips, using the full-length mirror as a guide. She felt depressed, disconsolate, her mission seemingly a failure. It didn't seem as though Noah Rudin was at all impressed or interested in her, despite her unique approach.

"Damn him," she muttered annoyedly, disappointedly.

Couldn't he see that she wanted him?

Not just a job, but *him?*

And that she'd give him a night he'd remember for some time to come?

"Damn him."

If he saw her solely as Bunny Bailey, unemployed actress, then the loss was his. And hers, she had to admit. Both kinds of loss. A part in his productions, for one.. and two, the loss of testing this unexpected emotion she was feeling, just thinking about him.

Both lost . . .

Funny thing, though. It was hard to figure out which one bothered her more. Certainly the business of getting a role in a show was important. And Noah Rudin was still the golden opportunity, regardless of the fact that she hadn't been able to take advantage of it. How often did a girl get such a chance?

But the other. Ah. How strange! She had never really felt like this before. Not for years and years and years—so far back that she could scarcely remember.

She wanted Noah Rudin. How, she just didn't know—it was sexy and unsexy all at the same time. No, she didn't care much about going to bed with him, not in the ordinary way, at least. Oh, if that was what he wanted from her, she would be quite willing, of course. She wouldn't deny him that pleasure.

But she really didn't care about sex with him. Not just plain sex, anyway. She wanted something more, and she just wasn't sure what it was. A relationship, perhaps. Some kind of relationship that transcended sex.

But what could it be?

One thing was certain. Never in her life had she felt such a marvelous thrill as when she had sat on his lap. When she had teased him and gotten him annoyed with her. For a moment back there at one time she had almost expected him to erupt and blaze out in genuine anger. Why, he might even have struck her. Not hard, of course; she was much too tiny and fragile for any man to really lose his temper with her.

But he might very well have slapped her face, that was how vexed he had seemed. Or taken her over his knee and walloped her backside—just as if she actually was a small child who had incurred his displeasure by willful disobedience.

Bunny shuddered. Such a delicious feeling! And so difficult to understand. Golly gee, at that moment she hadn't been acting at all. It was for real. She wasn't even thinking of him as Noah Rudin, the Broadway producer. Oh no. He was her Big Daddy. And she was a scamp of a little girl who belonged to him and loved him and feared him all at the same time.

How could such a thing be?

It was perplexing, to say the least. But it was doubtful whether she could ever find out the answer now. It was too late. She had tried to worm herself into his good graces all night, and she had to face the painful knowledge that her attempts had been failures. The man was invincible. And all her plotting and planning had gone for naught.

Oh, he had noticed her, all right. She definitely stood out among all these soignée sophisticates in their skin-tight sheaths and high-heeled shoes. He had seen her childish frock—and yes, even the ruffled pink bloomers too. She had deliberately gone out of her way to make sure that he did.

But if the costume had any effect at all, it was on her and not on him. He hadn't ignored it, of course—actually it had given him a hearty chuckle or two. But he hadn't really *felt* it, at least not in the way that she had. Big Daddy just hadn't been interested in his little girl.

Too bad . . .

Too bad for Big Daddy and too bad for the little girl. Maybe she ought to take the outfit off. She could borrow a robe or something like that from Kirsten. If some excuse was necessary she could spill a drink on herself.

And yet, regardless of the Big Daddy angle, there was the man himself to contend with. The producer. The big-shot who had the power to give her a boost. As such, he was more of an opponent than a friend. And somehow she just couldn't see her way clear to making an abrupt change in strategy. For one thing, there wasn't time. And she didn't know what new tack to take.

No, it would be folly to switch now and try to ferret out some hidden chink in the opposition's defenses. She would just have to go along with the same battle plan and hope for the best.

Battle plan—oh fine. That was a laugh. She could no more do battle with Noah Rudin that she could with the United States of America. He was too big. Too strong. Too solidly entrenched. And she was just too goddam puny.

But that wasn't the whole story either. Oh no. And she might as well take full recognition of the fact. It wasn't his strength that made the difference, it was her weakness. No, not weakness in general but a weakness. One specific weakness. That was why she couldn't fight Noah Rudin on even terms. The weakness. It prevented her from dueling with him even in the way that a woman crosses swords with a man. Well, not swords exactly; a woman had other, more effective weapons at her disposal in such tit-for-tat jousting in the eternal war between the sexes.

No, she wasn't ashamed of what she had. Her face was pretty and her body was a good one. It appealed to men and women alike. Kirsten had certainly proved that this afternoon. And even tonight, other people present had evinced a more than casual interest in playing footsie with her.

But the way she felt now, she knew it would be impossible to pit herself against Noah Rudin.

Because of the weakness.

Sure, it was easy to stay here in the bathroom behind a locked door and think of battle plans and warfare strategy. But the minute she got within sniffing distance of Noah Rudin all her schemes would fade away. Her composure would fall apart. Because she knew damn well that she'd be a little girl again.

She was positive of it. It had happened before and it would happen again. From a distance the man was Noah Rudin, the key to Broadway fame and fortune for an aspiring actress. But up close he was Big Daddy for a little girl.

And *that* was her weakness.

A deplorable situation, dammit. What good were her feminine wiles when the man's presence turned her knees to jelly and made her feel like a scared schoolgirl in front of a strict schoolmaster? She couldn't argue against authority, could she? Why, the very smell of the man, that nice after-shave-lotion smell, was enough to destroy her mature judgment. So how could she ever hope to bandy words with him in normal male-versus-female fashion?

She didn't have a chance, darn it.

Sighing a little, Bunny washed her hands and touched up her light makeup. Then, girded for what she knew would be a losing battle, she unlocked the door and stepped into the hallway.

From the main bedroom, dark-haired Lilith Devereaux hailed her with a sibilant *pssst!*

"You want me?" Bunny said.

"I sure do. Come in."

She entered the room. "What's up?"

"Lots of things, little girl." Lilith's eyes probed. "You *are* a little girl, aren't you?"

"I . . . uh . . ."

"But not *my* little girl, of course, you sweet thing. No, you're Big Daddy's little girl. True?"

Bunny hung her head.

"Well?" Lilith said sharply.

"I guess so. Something like that, anyway. But I don't understand it. I get such a funny feeling and I just can't seem to figure out what it is or why I get it."

"Is it a nice feeling?"

"Uh-huh. Nice."

"That's all, Bunny? Just nice? Not thrilling? Exciting? Sexy? Delicious? Terrific?"

"All of those, I guess. It's *scrumptious*."

Lilith laughed delightedly. "Scrumptious. Darling, that's a little girl's word if I ever heard one."

"Well, you asked me and I told you. It's the way I feel. But I just can't understand it."

"Don't try, sweet child, don't try. You don't have to understand. Some things are more fun if they remain a mystery."

"It's a mystery, all right."

"Of course it is. It should be. Believe me, Bunny, it's better that way. Don't try to figure it out—just enjoy it."

"Enjoy it? How? Who with?"

"Big Daddy, naturally."

"Oh sure. He doesn't even know I'm alive."

"He does now. Oh yes, Bunny, he and I had a little discussion about this and that and other things. About mysteries, for instance. I think you'll find him quite interested."

"Really?"

"Quite. Only there's one thing I've got to tell you. Don't say anything to him about show business. Don't try to prove what a great actress you are. Just be a little girl and that's all. Sure, I know you're hoping for a break from Noah, but this isn't the time to ask for it. You'll be much better off if you don't."

"But I wasn't even thinking of—"

Lilith cut her short. "Never mind what you were thinking. Just do as I say. Promise?"

"Well, I . . ."

"I guarantee you'll like it. Now, promise?"

"All right. I promise. Not a word about show-biz. But why are you doing this for me, Lilith? You came here with Noah, didn't you? I thought you and he were a team."

"No, honey. Just buddies, that's all. Good buddies. Noah did me a favor tonight and now I'm doing him one in return. And you're the favor."

Bunny shook her head in bewilderment. Things were happening too fast for her. Things that didn't make sense.

"Let me look at you," Lilith said. She patted her under the chin, raising her face to the light. "Hmm, no. I don't like the makeup. It doesn't quite fit."

"But I hardly have any on."

"It's still too much. A little girl's face should be clean and shiny." Without so much as a by-your-leave, Lilith took a wad of paper tissues from the dresser and started scrubbing the makeup off with vigorous strokes.

"Ouch!"

"Hush! And stand still. How can I do the job right when you're fidgeting like that?"

Bunny hushed. And stood still. It was so strange, standing here like this and letting the woman order her around with such firmness. Strange and kind of exciting. Especially since she knew it was being done to please Big Daddy.

"There," Lilith said. "Now you're perfect."

"All niced-up and pretty?"

"Oh my, you're such a little girl. Yes, Bunny, all niced-up and pretty, as you so quaintly put it. Okay. Go on out there and present yourself to Big Daddy."

"Oh. Right now?"

"What's the matter? Scared? Well, don't be. He won't eat you, you know." Lilith swung her around toward the door and gave her bottom a smart swat. "Now scat!"

Bunny gasped. But she ran. Almost as if she *had* to obey, she ran. In the living room Noah

Rudin was sitting on the sofa impassively. She moved toward him and then hesitated. Could it be that Lilith was playing some kind of cruel joke on her?

But no. It was no joke. The man's eye caught hers and he smiled and beckoned her close. He stood up and took her hand across the mosaic-tile table, holding tight as she took a centrifugal whirl around its free-form perimerer. With a silvery squeal of token resistance she let him tumble her onto his lap, giggling ecstatically as his huge hand came down upon her thighs in a slapping, kneading caress.

"Well, little girl," he rumbled, hot-breathed, in her ear, "have you been behaving yourself?"

She wanted to answer, but found no words. Only sensation, oddly familiar sensation which wiped out rational thought and time and place. She was in a dream, a lovely fantastic dream, and harsh angularities were smooth curves and every color was a blend in itself and each sound a thousand-violin orchestration.

Somewhere outside immediate consciousness there was an irksome splinter of reality imbedded in her flesh, something to do with depressing details about being a jobless actress. Later, perhaps, if rubbed the wrong way, it would cross the threshold of pain to focus, obscured by the overwhelming propinquity of the greying hair and the strong muscles and the spicy scent of after-shave lotion. And the hands on her thighs, the heavy hands with their creeping fingers . . .

This was Big Daddy, truly Big Daddy, and pretty Bunny was his little girl.

How or why, she did not know.

Nor did she care.

Chapter 12

LOOSE. Like real loose, with the good sound rolling off his fingers. A little time out, a little weed and a lot of piano. What more could a cat ask for?

Frankie Mann never felt better—three good drags and the glow was just right. Three—no more, no less—a booster charge that held the level without going beyond it. There was this thing about smoking pot that the amateurs didn't understand—if you took too much you were bound to lose track of the beat and pretty soon you'd be off in a corner somewhere, just plain goofing. Which was okay at a vipers' tea-party in the Village, but at a high-class juice-festival like this it would be a waste.

A real waste. Getting stoned out of your skull was a kick, but there was damn little future in it. Especially for the guys who made the good sound.

Most people didn't know it, but playing the piano took real concentration. All that stuff about jazzmen improvising something brand-new every time they sat down was for the sparrows. The creative bit—the smart lick, the fresh idea—just didn't spring to life fully grown. It was painstakingly worked out in private and then pretty much committed to memory. By the time the public got around to hearing it and paying for it all the clinkers were sifted out by hours of experimental practice.

It took a clear head. The keyboard was too complicated a gadget to hack away at and hope for the best. The eighty-eight notes didn't mean a damn thing unless the ten fingers were sure of where they were going. And nothing could put a damper on the act like too much pot or too much giggle-sauce or too much of anything that fogged the busy brain cells.

Take a little, you're loose. Take too much, you're dead. Okay, so you can still play pretty for the people, but the meaning is gone and the sound is empty. Real empty. Like a laundry hamper in a nudist camp. Empty.

Besides, there was only one big stick left in the shirt pocket, enough to get good and high on as soon as the action got started. And the rumor had zipped around—there was definitely going to be some wild action. After that, there wouldn't be much need for piano pounding, at least not the kind that required concentration.

No doubt Tecla would be around to share the wealth, but what the hell, he certainly wasn't going to begrudge her a few pokes. She had gotten him in here in the first place, hadn't she? And from the way things were shaping up, this was sure the place to be.

Damn right it was. Maybe they were squares and phonies and name-droppers, and then again maybe he'd figured them all wrong. Either way, they sure knew how to live, once they got their hair down. And it was coming down fast now, with every shaky chignon hanging by a few flimsy hairpins.

The touch on his shoulder did not disturb him; he was used to it by now. Probably a request for *Stardust* or maybe *Melancholy Baby*. Whenever good lushes got together it was always fair weather for the oldies and the tear-jerkers.

"What'll it be?" he said, not bothering to turn. "You name it, we've got it. Frankie Mann, at your service. Available for wakes, weddings and bar-mitzvahs."

The fingers on his shoulder tightened like a mechanical claw in a Coney Island slot-machine. He chorded a small coda and swung around as the harmony dissolved and died.

It was Tecla and she didn't look very happy. "Frankie, I've got to talk to you. Alone."

"Baby, slow down." He tapped his shirt-pocket storehouse. "I've only got one left."

"That's not what I mean. It's something else."

"Can't it wait? The mood is good. I wouldn't want to leave these nice people without some pretty noise."

"There's a hi-fi, Frankie. They'll turn it on."

"Canned music, huh? How about that?" He grinned. "Petrillo said there'd be days like this."

Tecla's sullen eyes smothered his light-heartedness. "Let's find a place. One of the bedrooms."

Somewhat perplexed, he rose and followed her. The view of her nylon-glazed legs almost made him forget his curiosity; even in a morbid mood this chick could make his hormones whistle street-corner mating calls. Manfully he resisted the temptation to spur her forward progress with a strategic helping hand.

They found an empty bedroom and went in. Outside, somebody pushed a button and the buzz of bright conversation sneaked behind a cloud of electronically relayed music.

Tecla snorted in disgust. "They didn't waste much time."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"The hi-fi."

"Oh. Hell, that's what it's for, isn't it? Come on, glamor-girl, you're not making sense."

"I'm sorry, Frankie." It was almost a strangled sob. Like an alto sax with a split reed.

"Sorry about what? Was my uptown debut a flop?"

"No. Certainly not, I'm sure of it. They all thought your music was great."

"Never mind the others. How about Rudin?"

"I told you. He liked it."

"Okay, Tecla, so I'm in. Now what the hell did you pull me away from the piano for?"

She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked up at him, naked concern leaking through her wide-open eyes. "Your debut was a success," she said in joyless tones, "but it's over. That's why I made you stop playing."

"Over? What do you mean, over?"

"It's finished. You're through for the night."

"Who says so?"

"Frankie, who do you suppose?" Her body shifted uneasily. "The hostess, of course. Kirsten Osgood."

"Oh . . ." He shrugged, still not quite comprehending the reason for all the gloom. "So what's wrong with that? If they want to hear some records it's okay with me."

"Like now I can circulate and win chums and influence chicks."

"No, Frankie."

"No?"

"Kirsten wants you to leave."

The recorded music oozing in through the doorway seemed strangely appropriate; the syrupy string section was slopping tears over a nauseating hearts-and-flowers theme. Frankie suffered its cloying consolation in silence, his thin body slouched and spent like a limp scarecrow with its head lolling punch-drunk from the wind. It was a moment of pure unadulterated misery.

"I'm sorry," Tecla murmured.

"Yeah . . ."

"I tried to talk to Kirsten, but she's been avoiding me. We had a little scrap a while ago and now she even sends her messages through a go-between. I was pretty mean to her, I guess, and this is her way of getting even."

"Hell, baby, if she's mad at you, why pick on me? Maybe I ought to go have a word with her, huh?"

"No. It wouldn't work. And if you got into a fight, it would only make things worse for

you in the long run. After all, we accomplished what we set out to do, didn't we? We got Noah Rudin to listen to your music."

"Yeah . . ." Speech was next to impossible. There was a big green bullfrog blowing a clogged bassoon in his throat.

He jammed his hands in his pockets and slumped to the bed, waiting for the impediment to croak. Or leap to some other lily-pad.

Tecla patted his thigh. "Anyway, it isn't that much of a party. So there's no need to sulk."

"Who's sulking?" Prodded by rising rage, the throat-bullfrog jumped and vanished.

"I should sulk because some goddam dyke puts me down? Listen, baby, I'm not sulking, I'm just plain mad. What am I, a second-class citizen?"

"That's unfair."

"Yeah. Unfair. What a crock! Moochers and freeloaders and name-droppers all over the place. Dykes and faggots practically making it in every bedroom. So who gets the thumb when the party gets good? Little Frankie, that's who. Frankie Mann, the untouchable."

Tecla's mouth contorted and her features lost their symmetry. For a moment she looked as if one half of her face was censoring what the other half was thinking about. Then her lips regained their composure, curving in a subdued smile.

He leaned toward her and kissed the upturned corners back into solemnity.

"Don't worry, glamor-puss, you're not contaminated. My room may be dirty, but I'm not." Again he kissed her, this time with open-mouthed ferocity.

She wriggled and then turned her head. "Hey, cut that out or I'll forget I'm supposed to be frigid."

"Yeah? That's interesting. I sure thought you forgot it this afternoon. For a while, anyway."

Abruptly, she slipped out of his embrace.

"But you needn't act so proud of yourself, lover boy. It was the pot, not you."

"That doesn't hurt my feelings. There's more back at my pad. Want to do a second show?"

"You know I do, Frankie. But if I walked out with you now, Kirsten would get pretty burned up. And she's too valuable a contact to throw away. If we want to stand in good with Noah Rudin, I'll have to be nice to her. Well, not *nice*, if you know what I mean. But I'd better keep her as a friend."

"Yeah? Are you sure it's me you're going to bat for? Not yourself? It looked to me like every chick in the joint has big eyes to get palsy-walsy with Rudin."

"Is that what you're thinking?" Tecla giggled nervously. "Don't be silly. All I care about is staying on the right side of him. It's *you* I'm doing it for."

"Okay, glamor-girl, I'll take your word for it. You really figure he'll do something for me?"

"I wish I knew. But one way or the other, it may take some time before I find out. So keep in touch with me, will you? A phone call only costs a dime."

"Less than that, baby. I know a guy in the Village who's got some slugs just the right size."

She laughed. "You and your beatnik friends." Suddenly businesslike, she dug a compact and lipstick out of her purse and set to work. Part way through the complex chore, she paused and glanced at him with a tenderness that seemed almost calculated. "Frankie . . ."

"Yeah?"

"You're not angry, are you?"

"No, not any more."

She hesitated for a moment. "That, uh, that last stick of pot. Could I have it?"

"Huh? You conning me, baby?"

"Of course not. I know better. But if I stay high maybe I'll be sharp enough to con Noah Rudin."

"You figure pot makes you sharp?"

"Come on, Frankie. Stop teasing. You know very well what it does to me."

"Yeah, I sure as hell do." Resigned to what passed for logic in the female mind, he drew the last marijuana cigarette from his shirt pocket and gazed at it wistfully. "That guy Rudin is a lucky bastard. I hope he realizes how lucky."

She watched him, eyes covetous. "It's a fat one."

"A bomb. I was saving it for the big windup. Oh well . . ." He dropped the cigarette into her open handbag with a little flourish.

"Greater love hath no man and all that jazz."

"You're a doll, Frankie."

"Yeah. A real doll. Use it in good health." He stood up from the bed, stretching self-consciously. "Okay, I guess that wraps it up, right? Am I supposed to say thanks for the lovely evening to the hostess or anybody?"

"Forget it. I'll let her know what a sweet boy you were. Just let yourself out with as little fuss as possible. And like I said, stay in touch with me."

"Sure, sure." Head hanging low, he ambled to the doorway and then stopped and turned. "Good hunting, glamor-puss."

"Hmm? Oh. Thanks, Frankie. Thanks for everything." She did not look up at him, the lipstick and compact-mirror holding all her attention. Her tone was dubiously grateful. "And thanks especially for not getting mad."

Mad? *Hah!*

He left the bedroom, plodding the length of the hallway with leaden steps. At the front door he stiffened for a tense instant, stung by the laughter and gaiety and tinkling sounds of revelry from the living room. The hi-fi was on, sticky and sweet, but no one was paying any attention to it.

Nobody missed him. They were all having a high old time. No one even cared about the piano player who had practically worn his fingers to the bone for them.

There were other things on their minds now. Important things. Like sex.

Mad? No, he wasn't mad, not in the slightest. He just felt like the broad who worked in a whorehouse for five years and then found out the other girls were getting paid.

Chapter 13

THIRTEEN

ALL in all, she was in pretty good shape, Kirsten realized.

Drunk, yes, but not too far gone that she didn't know what she was doing. It was a rather nice kind of tipsiness she wasn't tripping or staggering, and even her speech seemed to be comparatively unimpaired as it sounded in her own ears. And best of all, there was no sign of the hiccups or the queasy feeling that would send her rushing to the john to heave her cookies.

But she was drunk, just the same. With enough booze inside her to float a bevy of bikini-clad Aquacade beauties.

Well, that was responsibility for you. Responsibility—there was nothing like it to keep the brain functioning even when the body spoke up in opposition. This was her party. Noah Rudin was her boss. And she was justifiably proud that she was able to move around and get done the things that had to be done.

Earlier in the evening, of course, the guests had kept themselves amused and their drinks replenished without any help from her. But now there was a change in the air. They still poured their own booze, but the problem of amusement was in her capable hands.

And capable they were. Oh, yes. For quite a while now she had been busy as a one-armed scene-shifter. An orgy-type caper was in the making and she was setting the stage. The non-participants were weeded out. The few men. The faggots. The piano player. All gone. Only Noah remained—Noah and the girls.

Luckily, she hadn't had to do it all by herself. Bunny had been a great help, especially in dealing with Tecla and her two swains. Yes, little Bunny was quite a girl in more ways than one. Aside from taking on the thankless task of acting as assistant hostess, she had managed to make herself acceptable to Noah. More than acceptable, really—he seemed quite pleased to seize and hold a lapful of squirming flesh dressed in childish pink whenever the little rascal got within reaching distance.

Swaying just a tiny bit, Kirsten made a final survey of all the rooms. A satisfactory survey

—only the right people were left. True, she couldn't figure out why Tecla had stayed on. Not that she minded, actually, the girl was certainly welcome. Oh, there was a bit of a wall between them, of course, since that awful session in the bedroom. But Tecla's presence wasn't undesirable and her sultry beauty would definitely add to the coming romp. In fact, it would be nice to see her naked again. All that creamy loveliness. And naked she would have to be, that was for sure. It was practically a rule at this kind of thing, and no one—including Tecla, if she wanted to stay—would dare disobey it. Except for Noah, if he so chose.

But the time for action was ripe now. One last word with the boss, just to make sure he was still in the mood, was all that she needed. Then she could get things under way.

And it couldn't be too soon. Noah had already dropped the hint that Lilith Devereaux was definitely interested in becoming "one of the girls." And that in itself was enough to kindle impatience among the blasé, sophisticated chicks who were old hands at this sort of soirée. They were always intrigued by new blood. By unknown quantities.

They were intrigued? Kirsten trembled. She was more intrigued and more impatient than any of them. Only because of Lilith had she been able to act so cool toward Tecla. And now that all the preliminaries were over, she hoped fervently that neither Noah nor Lilith had changed their minds about the main event.

With little Bunny on his lap, Noah was sitting in the huge armchair in the corner. Kirsten approached him, her eyebrows arching quizzically and yet deferentially.

"Action?" she murmured.

He nodded. Then, "No. Wait a minute." He set Bunny down on her feet and patted her bottom. "See you later, little girl. Go get yourself a drink or something."

Bunny looked petulant. "But I want to stay with you."

"No, I want a private word with Kirsten. Besides, there's going to be a party and you'll have to be in it. You won't mind. You like parties, don't you?"

"Well, yes. But I want to stay with—"

"No," he said sternly. His hand nudged her backside again, this time in a propelling whack. "Now *scoot!*"

The little blonde moved off, rubbing her bottom ruefully. Kirsten smiled vaguely, not quite sure what to make of it. But she had more pressing things on her mind. "Noah, the gang is getting a bit restless. How about it?"

"Fine. Go ahead. Just one thing, though. Make sure that Lilith has a good time, will you? In a way, this is all for her. Why don't you get her aside somewhere in the very beginning?

The gay bit is kind of new to her and she might be embarrassed if she has to plunge in all at once. Okay?"

"Okay? Double-okay is more like it. I'd like nothing better. She's an absolute dream."

"Uh-huh. I thought you'd go for her. But take it easy in the beginning. I'm not sure how she'll react."

"All right. Easy does it. Now—action?"

"Action."

Kirsten went to the hi-fi unit and put on a fresh stack of popular records. "Anyone for dancing?" she called aloud.

It was like a signal. Couples got up all around the room. Breast to breast, belly to belly, thigh to thigh, they clutched each other and swayed in time to the languorous music. Whispering lips touched receptive ears. And as Kirsten circled them to dim the lights to near-darkness, hands roved and fingers explored. More girls came out of the other rooms to join in.

Kirsten spotted Lilith and wasted no time. Already zippers and fasteners were being undone, some surreptitiously, some boldly, depending on how well the halves of each couple knew one another. And on how successful the earlier overtures had been. In a few minutes, bare flesh would be showing.

"Join me, Lilith?"

"For dancing, you mean? I'd rather not, thanks. I've never cared much for it."

"Me neither. It's just to break the ice, really. But I've got a better idea."

"Oh?"

Kirsten leaned close. "The bedrooms are empty now. But they won't be for long. And Noah asked me to take good care of you."

"Uh-huh. That was nice of him. Wait, though, will you, please? I want to watch this. Oh, look at that!"

In a dim corner two of the dancers were kissing, open-mouthed, passionately, seemingly oblivious of their surroundings. Their hands wandered here and there, stroking breasts and buttocks, and yet at no time did they lose the rhythm of the music.

Lilith breathed deeply. "Exciting, isn't it?"

Kirsten shrugged. "I can think of other things more exciting." Her tone was deliberately noncommittal, but she could feel the terrible need tugging at her loins.

"I'll bet you can," Lilith said.

Kirsten felt awkward. She couldn't afford to rush the girl. Noah had said to take it easy with her at first. But it was more than the boss's order that held her back. This wasn't a floozie looking for a break in show business. This was a cultured, charming creature with wealth and social rank. A person of stature. A woman to woo with respect and not casual brusqueness.

A woman to fall in love with?

A tremor of anguished desperation rippled Kirsten's flesh. Oh, if she could only be clever and captivating like so many of the others. If she could only dredge her dazed brain for the right thing to say that would entice Lilith away from this mob scene. If she could only make the right gesture.

Lilith gasped. Evidently she had seen some other bizarre action among the dancers. Then, almost resolutely, she caught Kirsten's arm.

"Did you say something about a bedroom?"

Relief washed Kirsten's doubts away. Relief that immediately gave way to acute urgency. "Come on."

Inside her bedroom she locked the door. Lilith seemed to slump into her arms as their mouths met. Kirsten felt like swooning as the soft lips quivered under her own. She slid her tongue out and the lips parted.

And then—*oh, ecstasy*—her questing tongue was welcomed by another one. Her temples throbbed and pounded as the kiss waxed in intensity. She moved her hand to cup the full breasts for a delightful moment of investigation, then took it out from between their bodies as she savored the joy of that marvelous bosom crushing against hers, Even through layers of clothing the heat seemed to sear her flesh to the very bone.

The clothing—she wanted to take it off. And to remove her own. She wanted this softness against her naked skin without any vestige of obstructing fabric.

But she didn't dare, It was too soon. Even as her fingers acted under their own impulse and toyed with a fastener, she knew it was too soon, The girl wasn't ready; she wasn't an experienced lesbian, the kind who had little need for slow seduction.

Take it easy, Noah had said.

Then with shocking suddenness, Lilith tore her mouth away. "Dammit, what the hell are we standing like this for? Let's get undressed, Isn't that what we're supposed to do? Get undressed and into bed?"

It took mere seconds. Clothing was discarded and tossed out of the way. And now, naked

and ready, Lilith fell into a supine position.

Eagerly Kirsten bent to the denuded softness. The idea of the slow seduction was a thing of the past. Lilith was new at the game—the lesbian game—but it was apparent that she was experienced in sex. Experienced and certainly uninhibited. Noah's advice was well-meant, no doubt—but who needed it?

Her mouth sought the ripe breasts, Her tongue circled each nipple, not touching it at first but making ever-narrowing loops. Until Lilith's frantic voice exploded in her ears.

"Kiss them, damn you! What the hell are you waiting for? Stop playing around like that. If you're going to do it, do it! Kiss my breasts, Kiss me all over!"

Oh, how wrong Noah had been!

"Mmm, yes, that's nice." Lilith's ferocity subsided, "Oh, I like that. Yes, Again."

Kirsten didn't have to be told twice. It was odd to make love like this, to play the active butch role that she was used to and still be told what to do. Odder still to be told by a girl who had never been through this kind of thing before.

Odd—yes—but sweet.

"There too . . ." The voice again.

There too. Who was rushing who? But it seemed like the right thing to do. The right place. It was difficult to conjure up anything that wouldn't be right if that voice said it was. So why worry about taking the initiative? All she had to do was what that voice was telling her to.

And it was sure telling her.

The woman was charming and her tone was cultured, but the words themselves were definitely not the kind taught in high-priced finishing-schools for young society ladies. Lilith Devereaux was certainly no prude—*that* was obvious.

The words weren't new. Kirsten had heard them before. But they were totally unexpected, and the shock of it made them sound wild beyond belief. Never in her life had she heard such language flung out like that. And never in her life had she known such excruciating joy in hearing words like these.

Yes . . . *joy!*

Because the voice was spurring her on, inciting her to boldnesses outside the realm of her own experience. It pricked her, jabbed her, pierced her brain—inflaming her body to the very core and provoking her to greater excesses than she had ever dreamed possible. Until the world opened up like a rumbling volcano and spewed hot lava for a century until it came to an end.

Then—and only then—did the voice stop. And in that moment of silence Kirsten regained a semblance of comprehension and realized that she was falling in love.

Here we go again.

"Hey, that was great." Lilith was sitting up. "Look what I've been missing all these years."

Kirsten could not speak.

"You know something? I'll bet it would be even better with three or four girls together." Lilith seemed carried away by this new facet of her sexual education. "What do you say we go out there and join the party, huh?"

Kirsten's heart plummeted from the heights. "Do you really want to, darling?"

"Sure. Don't you?"

"Wouldn't you rather stay here with me?"

"Kirsten, that would be repeating ourselves, wouldn't it? How about all those cute kids out in the living room. Wouldn't you like to see what's going on there?"

"I know what's going on there."

"No doubt. But I don't."

"Please, Lilith. Please don't go."

"Honey, don't be like that. You were great. I had fun. So why do you have to spoil it?"

"I'm sorry."

"Okay, Kirsten. No harm done." Lilith rose from the bed. "Thanks. And I really mean it. You were terrific,"

"So were you."

"I'm glad you think so. Say, do we have to get dressed all over again to go out there?"

"No. I'm sure it won't be necessary, Lilith. You can go just as you are. You'll be a big hit."

"I hope so. I really want to try everything tonight. And with everybody. Maybe even all at the same time." Lilith scanned the room. "Dammit, where are my shoes? Oh, there they are. I hate to walk around barefoot."

Kirsten watched as Lilith slipped her feet into the high-heeled pumps. "You're beautiful," she murmured.

"And you're sweet to say so. Come on, honey, aren't you coming with me?"

"I think I'll stay a minute."

"Don't you even want a fresh drink?"

"Soon. Go ahead, Lilith."

"Okay, honey. See you later." The naked body strode off majestically, perched on the high

heels.

Kirsten choked back a sob. Yes, she wanted a fresh drink. Two drinks. Three. Enough to get goddam drunk. Enough to make her forget that she had once again offered her heart only to see it calmly and carelessly ignored.

Chapter 14

WOMEN!

Naked women!

So many that he couldn't count them. Although it wasn't the actual number that made the calculation so difficult, it was the incessant movement. The shifting of bodies from place to place never allowed the pattern to remain constant.

Still fully-dressed, Noah Rudin leaned back in his easy chair and sipped his mild drink and gave up trying to keep track. In this dimly lit room that looked like the women's quarters in Hell, accurate tabulation was impossible. Limbs interlocked and then separated to form new attachments with other limbs. Flesh glided against flesh and scarcely seconds later journeyed on toward different flesh. Lips and fingers and mouths and hands and breasts and buttocks met and diverged and came together again in fresh configurations.

It was like a tapestry which was being woven and rewoven and would never reach completion. The warp and the woof refused to remain permanent, and consequently the tableau they depicted was a twisted blur in a state of perpetual motion.

It was complicated and confusing, but it was rather pleasant to see, nevertheless, and Noah found it quite enjoyable. True, his eyes were getting tired from peering through the semi-darkness to keep score of the changing activity. And for some reason he didn't feel stirred enough to make a personal entry into the scene. But it was exciting to watch, just the same.

Besides, there was always Lilith. He had promised her a good time and it did his heart good to know that she was getting it. In the low-key lighting, all the naked feminine bodies appeared somewhat alike. Faces were indistinguishable and complete individual recognition hopeless. But he had no trouble picking out Lilith whenever he cared to. She was the only one with shoes on.

Noah grinned. Leave it to Lilith to present herself in the sexiest manner possible. Oh, she had an ostensible excuse, of course she claimed that she didn't like walking around barefoot. But it was only an excuse. Lilith was well aware of what high heels did to bring out the

seductive aspect of the female leg. And even in the midst of all this total nudity she was apparently unwilling to reverse her opinion merely for the sake of conformity.

I hate walking around barefoot—how many times had he heard her say it? Well, she wasn't walking around now—definitely not—but she still had her shoes on. And as often as one or the other of her long limbs swung through the air out of the mass engagement, the high heels never dropped off her feet. Only once had he lost sight of them, but then as the compact cluster of bodies untangled like a pile-up of football players after the referee's whistle, the shoes had immediately popped into view again.

Yes, Lilith was having a good time. And it was evident that she intended to play the field tonight. Couples strolled to and from the bedrooms frequently, but now that her indoctrination by Kirsten was over, Lilith seemed happy to remain in the more heavily-populated living room. And the girls present seemed equally happy to have her here. Lilith was the center of attraction. The leading lady. And it was obvious that she was reveling in her stardom.

Noah was pleased. He had done his good turn for today. But he wasn't getting as big a charge out of this nude jamboree as he had hoped for, and he wondered why. Perhaps it was because of Bunny. He missed the little scamp. But he had sent her away and now she was off in a bedroom somewhere. And he didn't care to go pushing open doors to locate her. No one would complain, of course, but he still didn't consider it quite cricket to interrupt the couples that sneaked out for romantic privacy from time to time.

Anyway, he was pretty worn out and would be leaving soon. Lilith was doing fine; she didn't need him. And he'd be running into Bunny at some future date, he was sure.

A new platter fell into place on the hi-fi. It was the recently recorded stripteaser thing; he recognized it immediately. And so did everyone else.

A red-haired girl stood up and began to dance. Twisted knots of bodies unsnarled and moved back to give her room. Noah decided to postpone his leave-taking for a while.

The girl had no clothing to peel off, but it didn't matter. She did very well with what she had. And she had plenty.

Her full hips twisted and jerked in a series of bumps and grinds. Her big breasts bobbed and quivered. Taut muscles formed ridges in her spread thighs. She bared her teeth and threw her head back, intoxicated by the rhythm, and the mop of red hair streamed out behind her in a shimmering cascade. Her eyes closed, and it was as if she was some lovely creature caught up in her own passion and dancing for herself alone.

But she did not remain alone long. A blonde, somewhat less pretty but no less agile, rose to her feet. With grinding contortions that were well-nigh incredible she worked her way across the floor toward the redhead. Then they were together, the pair of them, not touching but barely inches apart.

The fury of their motions increased, and the powerful forces of each bumping action seemed to drag their solidly placed feet forward, toward each other, on the thick carpet. Until, in a simultaneous pelvic thrust, the two bodies touched.

They held the contact, shoulders thrown back and loins jutting. Indistinct noises burbled from their lips. Pearls of sweat broke out in glistening droplets. They shook and shivered from head to toe and it seemed as if all of their flesh was twitching in some strange kind of synchronous vibration. And yet the two arched bodies made contact at only a single point.

Then, as the music went into a second strain, they straightened up and glued themselves together. The blonde took the lead. Her arms encircled and gripped. The legs intertwined. Mouths met. And the pair sank to the floor.

In a moment they were out of sight, buried under the audience which preferred to show its appreciation with kisses and caresses rather than applause. In the wriggling heap of naked femininity Lilith's shoes were plainly visible.

Noah sighed and stood up. It was time to depart the premises, he figured. There was no need to let anyone know he was leaving. He would call Kirsten tomorrow and thank her for the nice party. Besides, she had looked pretty drunk the last time he saw her. Best he slip out unnoticed.

But it didn't work out that way. He was in the vestibule, nearing the front door, when Bunny came out of the hallway. She squealed in glee when she saw him, then stopped short and became suddenly bashful, picking at the ruffles of her single bit of apparel, the pink bloomers that had seemed so absurd a while ago.

He didn't mind the garment now, oddly enough. Somehow, amid so much shameless nudity, her childish modesty was rather charming. And the fact that it was meant for him alone was highly complimentary.

"Have you been avoiding me?" she said. She glanced at him, her eyes uncertain. "You sent me away. I thought maybe you'd come and try to find me."

"Uh-huh. But I didn't want to disturb anyone. Anyway, I was sure that you'd found something interesting to keep you nicely occupied. Did you?"

"Well . . ." She bit her lower lip guiltily, a little girl with a big burden of sin. "Well, you

know . . ."

"Yes, I know."

Her reaction to his gruff tone was remarkable. "Please don't be angry with me." She plucked the pink ruffles with nervous fingers and held them out daintily for his examination. "See? I kept my pretty panties on—just for Big Daddy."

"Good thing you did."

She accepted his heavy-handed approval with beaming brightness and then sidled close, cuddling shyly against him. "Were you getting ready to leave?"

"That's right."

Her voice quavered. "But you really don't have to go home so soon, do you?"

"I don't, but I'm going to."

"Oh . . ."

"It's late. And I'm tired."

"I'm sorry." Her nose wrinkled with a little sniff and she seemed close to tears. "I only thought, well . . ."

"Eh? You thought *what?*"

"Oh, nothing. It's not important."

"Stop that," he said ponderously. "It's not polite to start something and leave it unfinished."

"I thought . . . uh, well, I know it's late, but I was hoping you might want to take me with you." She hung her head. "There. I've said it. And I'm so ashamed."

Abruptly, as if a new day had dawned and obliterated the cares of the old one, Noah no longer felt tired. And he was sure now why he had not been carried away by the wild scene in the living room. This, then—little Bunny—was what he had wanted all the time.

Slow down, he told himself. Sure, it would be interesting to take her with him. Especially since she seemed so willing. But the willingness itself made him pause and take stock. The girl was an actress—was she trying to con him? Did she really want Big Daddy or was she just playing a part and hoping to chisel some fat Broadway role out of him.

Bunny's head came up slowly and their eyes met. Hers were wistful. She seemed so small and pathetic, a kind of in-between creature who was too young to be a grown-up and too old to be a schoolgirl. Like something that was half-woman and half-child.

And all merchant?

Okay, so there was that possibility. Just a little con-artist looking for a break. But what of

it? He didn't have to promise her anything, did he? Besides, if it did work out that way, well, she had already proved herself a pretty competent actress. As good as the ingenue, maybe, the one who had been a smart operator so many years ago. He had never regretted that one, had he? Well, he hoped he wouldn't regret this one either.

Impulsively he wrapped his arms around her slight body in a bearlike embrace. He lowered his head and brushed his cheek lightly against her upturned face. It was hours since he had shaved, and a prickly stubble had grown out.

She squirmed in his grasp. "Oooh, that's scratchy . . ." But she made no effort to turn away.

The grazing gesture continued, and he felt the quiver of excitement that ran through her. Brusquely he clapped his hands upon her slim shoulders and held her out at arm's length. "Bunny," he said gravely, "you've been a naughty girl tonight. You shouldn't have taken part in such a wicked party."

Her eyes were downcast in meek silence.

He probed sternly. "Am I right?"

"I guess so . . ." It was a throttled, timid whisper.

His tone turned loud and harsh. "And do you know what happens to naughty girls?"

Quailing, she nodded mutely.

"Well?" he thundered.

She trembled like a meadow mouse at the sound of a swooping hawk. Then, slowly, as if each word was a separate stumbling-block, she forced herself to speak. "They . . . get . . . spanked?"

He chuckled, spun her around and tapped her backside gently. "Now scoot," he said. "Go put your clothes on and hurry. I'll wait right here. Understand?"

"Yes, Big Daddy."

"And don't keep me waiting too long."

"I won't. I'll be right back. Honest." With a sidelong glance that was more sly than shy, she scanned his menacing expression and then scampered away obediently.

Noah blinked and rubbed his furrowed brow, startled by what he had seen in her eyes, the unbridled lust that gleamed nakedly and then turned misty with gratitude for its promised assuagement. It was a weird expression, to put it mildly.

Yes, utterly weird. And certainly incongruous in so youthful a face and body—until he realized how deeply he had been sucked into the bewildering maelstrom of her fantasy. Bunny Bailey was no adolescent, not by any stretch of the imagination, yet for a few minutes

he had been entirely in empathy with her seductive swindle. And to some extent he still was.

Well, he sure had to hand it to Lilith for knowing the score. The whole business was comparatively unexplored territory and yet she hadn't steered him wrong. The incredible relationship was developing exactly as predicted—Bunny was on a "little girl" kick and had selected him to play the fatherly disciplinarian.

Once again he chuckled, aware that he had not felt so high-spirited for quite a while. Bunny's aberration was bizarre, all right, but not at all distasteful now that he had sampled it. Yes, it would be pleasant to spend the remainder of the night in his own apartment. Seated in his favorite armchair, perhaps, with Chopin on the record-player and Chivas Regal on the rocks—served by a lithe-limbed young filly who shuddered in fearful ecstasy if he so much as looked at her cross-eyed.

Still, there were some puzzling blanks in Lilith's necessarily brief explanation, and one in particular kept cropping up in his mind. As she had described it, the play-acting was comparable to a scene upon a stage, vivid and lifelike, to be sure, but play-acting nevertheless. But wasn't it possible that in the heat of some hectic moment the drama might get out of hand and go beyond the realm of make-believe? Wasn't it possible that two people sleepwalking down the same path might suddenly awake to find that mere fantasy had turned into stark reality?

Or was this one of those things a man could know only when he had tried it himself?

Chapter 15

SOME romantically-inclined soul had extinguished even more of the dim lights, leaving only a small solitary bulb to spread its weak rays over the living room. It seemed to dilate and dwindle intermittently, and for purposes of actual illumination it was practically useless. The place was all but pitch-black.

On the hi-fi system, a sad songstress with the breathy tone of an underblown horn bewailed her lonely existence at great length, confessing plaintively that her virtue remained unimpaired not by choice but merely as the dreary consequence of insufficient temptation. Accompanying the hapless maiden, the swish of metallic whisks on a calfskin drumhead sighed like a seashell placed against the ear. Or like a pair of shells—one at each ear—for anyone fortunate enough to be equi-distant from both stereophonic speakers.

The volume of the machine was turned down to an unobtrusive level. It impinged upon no one's clandestine communion and yet managed to lay an acoustical shroud over all but the sharpest outcries. There were people moving about—material creatures of flesh and blood, audible, visible, tactile—but somehow the room seemed to be tenanted solely by disembodied echoes and shadows.

Staggering a little and having great difficulty balancing her brimming drink, Kirsten Osgood peered through the muffled obscurity. She was not quite sure what—or whom she was seeking. But the hour had come to demonstrate, once and for all, that she was *not* merely a woman to be used rather than loved.

Somewhere in this amicable coterie, she was certain, a plump and preening dove awaited her arrival with a repertoire of cooing endearments. With honest admiration and affection which would wipe out the stigma and free her forever from the flippancy of Lilith and the insolence of Tecla.

Yes, somewhere in this deceptive darkness there was bound to be a comforting pillow for her bloody but unbowed head. A bosom that would be a soft sanctuary where tender feelings could nurse her back to sanity. A body that would welcome her embrace, not as a casual party gesture, not as a trade deal, but as a thing to be cherished. A woman that would love her for

herself alone.

And when she found such a woman she would prove to Tecla and Lilith and to all the world that love was more than a quick convulsion conceived for no purpose other than material gain or momentary sex-satisfaction.

A faint torpor settled upon her spirits. The stifling gloom was becoming unbearable, but she didn't dare upset the strewn-out bodies by turning on more lights. Selectivity was next to impossible in this game of musical chairs, and nowhere in the surrounding rustles and murmurs did there seem to be a place for her. Nobody noticed, nobody cared. Naked and alone she had come into exile—and there was no sweet playmate, no ardent companion, no shared willingness to discover and enter the unfound door. Everyone was occupied, too much so to pay her the slightest heed.

Not quite everyone. A hand touched her and a voice spat out an unladylike oath. Lilith Devereaux wriggled into the blurred field of vision. Kirsten bent low to hear the tail end of the woman's sharp-tongued speech.

"Cut that out, damn you," Lilith was muttering angrily. "Just stop it, will you?"

"Huh? Stop what?"

"Who's that?" Lilith squinted up, somewhat myopically. "Oh, it's you. The audio is all right, the damn video is lousy. Just be more careful, will you, Kirsten?"

"But what did I do?"

"Your drink. You spilled the damn thing all over me."

"Oh. Sorry." Kirsten rose to full height, mildly indignant at such truculence over so trivial a mishap. "But it's dark in here, Lilith. Practically a total eclipse. So a few drops of alcohol splashed out, that was all."

"Hey, you're drunk. Stop wobbling."

"Okay, so I'm drunk. So what?"

"Well, you needn't act so huffy about it, Kirsten. I didn't know it was you spilling the booze. If I said anything to hurt your feelings, I apologize."

"Apology accepted."

"Oh, you're cute." Lilith's simper was almost a leer. "I'm glad you were the first."

"First?"

"Uh-huh. *My* first. I've lost count since then, but I'll always remember the first time."

Lilith giggled.

"We must do it again some time. Care to?"

"Of course." Kirsten's heart leaped. "Anytime you say. Right now suits me fine."

"Now? Well, all right. But I'm parched, absolutely parched. I'm dying for a drink. Is there anything left in yours? Never mind the brand, it's immaterial."

"Scotch, I think. I didn't notice it when I poured. And there's gallons. Want some?"

"Love it. Come. Sit down before you fall down."

It was a definite invitation. She surveyed Lilith thoughtfully and nodded, vaguely disconcerted by the effects of the long night upon the woman's beauty.

Lilith seemed older, somehow, and even a bit haggard around the eyes. But Lilith was still a prize, and Kirsten was anxious to capture her. This then, was the plump, preening dove for her. Plump, yes, in spots, at least, and certainly preening—but alas, not very dovelike and obviously no searcher for the unfound door. Their love-making would be brief, at best—Lilith had already displayed her inconstancy all too well.

Nevertheless, it would be fun.

Kirsten swayed. The carpet seemed to be careening beneath her feet. Mindful of the precious nectar in the glass, she lowered her weight gradually into a deep-knee bend. Then, exercising utmost caution, she braced herself for the final maneuver toward the desired sitting position. For a long moment she remained in a motionless squat, gathering strength for the formidable feat.

"Come on," Lilith said.

"Wait. I'm girding my loins."

"The hell you say. Let's have that drink, huh?"

Lilith need not have bothered to ask. The unruly floor tilted again and Kirsten tumbled backward, lunging for support which was not there. The glass never left her fingers, but its liquid contents did. Like a fireball lofted by an ancient catapult against some besieged citadel, the unguided missile whooshed out in an amber trajectory to slosh down and drench its target of pregnable, hypersensitive womanhood with icy and stinging alcohol. No modern radar equipment could have achieved greater accuracy.

Lilith screamed, caught her breath and then—to Kirsten's intense dismay—went on screaming with renewed vigor, adding words to fit the music, unpleasant words in the main, descriptive adjectives unfit for any aesthetic ear.

In the bedroom, in the throes of passion, similar words had not been amiss. But now, delivered with such wrath, they seemed a bit out of keeping somehow. And apparently there would be no end to the harangue. Other than a decided lack of diaphragm control, Lilith

seemed to be in excellent voice.

Moreoever, there was now an audience. Jaded by their simple pastimes and ever alert to anger and possible violence as a form of stimulation, they were gathering around to see the fun.

Kirsten sighed. A discreet retreat was in order. This was her party, but it was getting out of control. She was only glad that her boss was no longer here to see her downfall.

With comparatively little dignity, she crawled out from under the snarling scurrility and left the theatre-in-the-rounders to devise their own entertainment. She found a convenient wall and crawled up its perpendicular surface to stand erect once more. The new-found elevation was balm for her bruised ego; now she was a human again and not a weak and frightened pussy-cat.

But she needed another drink. Now that the incident was over, her only real regret was the deplorable waste of good liquor. True, it hadn't gone entirely down the drain—depending upon one's viewpoint—but for all practical purposes it was better forgotten. Anyway, this was her apartment and she knew exactly where the nearest fountain was. Her thirst would not go unquenched for long.

She got her bearings, pointed herself in the right direction and started off. At the booze supply she dropped into a chair and poured a drink, disregarding ice and soda and other nonsensical trifles. At this distance from the only source of light, the darkness was a shield against the outer world, enclosing her in a haven of peace and solitude.

Or so she thought.

Then the twinkling cigarette-tip caught her eye, a fiery gem on an endless expanse of black velvet. It was low and off to the side and not really in her way but it was an intrusion. She swung around in her seat to make an investigation, and after a long moment of peering, reached a speculative decision.

"Tecla?"

No answer.

She raised the decibel level. "Tecla?"

"Umm . . ."

"I can't see. Tecla, is that you?"

"It's me."

Hope springs eternal. "Are you alone, darling?"

Drily, "I was."

"Oh . . ."

Tecla inhaled deeply and the cigarette cast a gentle glow, limning her pale nudity. Lying on her back with legs loosely asunder, she looked like an inverted slingshot with its bark peeled off.

Kirsten sniffed. "What's that you're smoking?"

There was no reply, not even a shrug. Untrammeled, Tecla's hair was an open fan of lustrous lace. The classic beauty of her features in repose called out in silent eloquence.

Faint heart never won fair dove. Kirsten stretched an arm out and grazed the girl's shoulder in tentative inquiry. No response—neither pro nor con—and she repeated the caress, inspired by the satiny softness under her fingers.

Still no reaction; and suddenly she realized that Tecla was holding her breath.

Kirsten gasped and pulled away. Marijuana, of course. How awful! But she couldn't find it in her heart to criticize the lovely creature. And if ever there was an opportunity to redeem herself after that dreadful fiasco with Lilith, this was it. Tecla was undoubtedly stoned out of her head from smoking the stuff.

Oh, yes, this was a great chance. Tecla certainly wouldn't turn her down in this condition. And who could tell? Perhaps Tecla was destined to be her permanent dove, after all? Maybe those two ugly men, Hal Greener and that piano player, were only cover-ups for what the girl really wanted. She had sent them packing, hadn't she? And without any noticeable qualms, either.

Uh-huh. That was it, no doubt. The girl was afraid of becoming a complete lesbian. Much as she had enjoyed their affair, she was holding back. She didn't want to go overboard.

And who could blame the poor kid?

Because it was tough, this business of being a lesbian. Knowing that you were abnormal, some kind of pariah in the eyes of the world was no picnic. Sure, you tried to be discreet about it. You didn't go around flaunting it in people's faces. You kept it under wraps and stayed with your own kind.

But it was no laughing matter.

So who could blame Tecla for fighting shy of it? There was nothing quite so final as entering into a permanent lesbian relationship. Once taken, that step was irrevocable. It put a girl into this nether-land of outcasts for the rest of her life. It pinned a label on her, a label marked *poison*.

Of course, the relationship itself might not remain permanent. They seldom did, for that

matter, since there were no legal ties involved and no divorce courts to have to face when the break-up came. But when a girl came out of such an affair, she only looked for another one to go into. A similar one. Because she was already in too deep to go back to the normal world of men and marriage and babies and suburban cottages and PTA meetings.

Still, if a girl *was* gay, well, what else could she do but accept that fact? Lesbian life was rough, but it had its compensations. And there was no substitute for those compensations, at least not in the arms of a man. Definitely not. It was even rougher to lie in bed with a sweaty, smelly, hairy male and feel obligated to fake a passion that just didn't exist. And poor Tecla would be finding that out soon.

I'm drunk, Kirsten thought, I'm drunk but I'm smart.

Yes, smart. Because she knew what had gone wrong in her affair with Tecla. And she knew what to do about it now. No more talk of eternal love and faith and settling down together. That was what had scared the girl away.

Slowly—that was the way to do it. Slowly and smoothly. She would have to woo Tecla all over again. Perhaps it would be a long and laborious process. But it would be worth it. Because in the end—without any overt mention of it—the sweet darling would be hers forever. Forever and ever.

Slowly . . . smoothly . . . ah yes.

Kirsten took a gulp of her drink to steady her fluttering nerves. She leaned down. "Tecla?" Again she reached out with her hand to stroke the soft flesh. "Tecla?"

With a snorting, choking noise the girl rolled away. The pent-up smoke exploded from her lungs. "Damn you!" she said. "Now you've made me lose it."

"Huh?"

"Drunken bitch! Why don't you mind your own business!"

"Tecla, honey, wait a minute. Hey!"

But the girl was already up on her feet and out of sight, swallowed by the night-gloom that rushed in on Kirsten, bringing not the boon of welcome privacy but the bitter burden of forced isolation. She slumped in her chair and stared into the dark void with unseeing eyes, a derelict, a leper, a friendless alien in a land which had no need of her.

Oh well, she thought, that's show biz.

Only it wasn't very funny. Nor did it even fit the situation. But then she wasn't supposed to be the comic type, was she?

The drink beckoned. She picked it up and drained it. Right down to the last drop. *There*.

That would do it. Now she wouldn't have to worry about people like Tecla or Lilith. Or anybody. The booze would take care of her.

But this was her party. Her party-party. And it was about time she started enjoying it. Sex—that was the thing. Hot sex. The hell with love. The hell with love and faith and swearing eternal vows. Just sex—what else mattered?

Reeling, she went back to the orgy on the living-room carpet and sank into a heaped-up huddle of writhing bodies. Hands touched her. Mouths. She found a furry nest of flesh and buried herself in it. She didn't know who. She didn't care. Flesh. Sex. That was all. The hell with everything else. This was her party. These were her people. This was her land.

But it was no good.

Because she knew that when the lights came back on she would be an alien once again.

Chapter 16

WITH the end of Frankie's farewell gift smoldering between her fingers, Tecla sat naked on the step-stool in the dark kitchen, grimly compiling an ideal passenger manifest for a doomed transatlantic jetliner. Paradoxically, the problem seemed to be one of elimination rather than inclusion; for even the mightiest of airborne monsters lacked sufficient seat-belts to girdle the hated guts of so many prospective voyagers. Tonight in particular she would gladly have purchased one-way tickets to perdition for Kirsten Osgood and Company. The whole damn mess of them.

It was one of those nights. The metal stool was like ice, and its first contact had goosefleshed her unfortified bottom beyond repair. But it was the only available seat in the last possible asylum against the raving lunatics outside. One more crude approach, one more crass pass by some slobbering lesbian and there would have been clawed eyeballs rolling around the floor like marbles. Here in the kitchen, at least, there was seclusion, if nothing else—evidently no one cared to attempt an amorous and heated embrace sandwiched between the cold sink and the colder refrigerator.

In the other rooms the party was in full swing, alternating raucous sound with stealthy silence and giving no indication of any let-up. But Tecla was content to remain here and do penance in her tiny cloister, having renounced the world and all its mundane misdemeanors. The kitchen was appropriately uncomfortable—a sombre cell where an ascetic nun who had sacrificed her vestments in the name of charity might mortify her flesh and contemplate her uplifting martyrdom.

She grimaced, gritting her teeth to stop their chattering. If only the stool hadn't been so damn cold! But then, by the same token, her martyrdom wouldn't have been quite so uplifting.

It was her own fault. She should have had more sense than to stay among these savages. Now her clothes were strewn all over the living room, and there was little to do but shiver and wait for the melee to run its gruesome course. It was ridiculous, this predicament that she was in, but the crime was her own and the punishment fitting. She was paying for her

stupidity, re-enacting the role of the naive ingenue who started out nude in the first act and was covered with remorse later in the show.

Noah Rudin was impossible, and pleading Frankie's case had been exasperatingly futile. With his inscrutable smile and his meaningless nodding agreement, the man was a wall that had remained undented by all her sultry glances and persuasive talk. Even a definite refusal would have been kinder than his "maybe, maybe not" vacillation. A firmly spoken no would have put her out of her misery early in the game, and there would have been none of this cooling of heels and fanny in this unlit igloo of a kitchen. Especially if she had known that he was going to remain fully dressed and be a peeper instead of a participant. And then stroll out with that ridiculous little Bunny Bailey.

That was the crowning touch. Noah Rudin at a wild party. Noah Rudin, an authentic bigwig, and she hadn't even been able to get close to him.

It was enough to give a girl a complex.

Noah Rudin was the only reason she had stayed on when the party got to the orgy stage. The reason for her being in this fix now. And now she had to face the ugly knowledge of her own personal involvement. Did she really care what he had to say about Frankie's piano-playing? Was she interested in Frankie Mann at all except as a source of marijuana? Or was she just another one of the lay sisters, a starry-eyed but shrewd Cinderella looking for a Producer Charming.

It was something to think about, but self-analysis wasn't going to get her clothes back. And analysis would have to go pretty deep to justify her last-minute flight from the miniature Sodom out there. At the time, it had seemed like the logical thing to do. There had been no itch for entanglement while she still had some pot to smoke. Especially with Noah Rudin just sitting there doing nothing. So she had merely moved off and stayed out of the way, aware that she had to get good and stoned before joining the festivities.

But now the weed was practically gone and she felt more reluctant to take part than ever. The mere thought of *looking* into the living room was abhorrent—and anyway, why take the risk of turning into a pillar of salt?

So much priceless pot had gone to waste! Four times she had lit up and relaxed in different hideaways, only to butt out the cigarette because of some rude interloper. Finally, sick of traipsing about like a moviegoer hunting a seat in a double-feature grindhouse, she had landed here in the kitchen. But all that lighting and snuffing out and relighting the stick had done its damage, leaving her far from stoned and very little to get stoned on.

A sorry plight. No Noah Rudin, no party mood, no clothes, no pot, no Frankie to supply some and not even Hal Greener to come to the rescue and smother her with his square-type but nevertheless reliable love. It was enough to give a girl's complex a complex.

Through the closed door she could hear approaching noises. The sound blasted her out of her lethargy. Quickly she took the last drag on the roach-size butt, frying fingers and lips in the process, and then tossed the wadded-up remains into the sink. Her sanctum sanctorum was about to be invaded.

"Hungry?" someone said.

"I think so," came the giggling reply. "If I had something to eat I could make sure."

Food amid the carnal capers? Tecla chuckled soundlessly. A rarity but not unique; in one way or another the bodily appetites would be served tonight. At any rate, she was due for a hasty exit before the seekers of sustenance took over. And high time. She had been tired of this party for much too long—and now she was tired of being tired of it.

Ruefully rubbing the circulation back into her penitent posterior, she slipped off the stool and glided out to the hall. She knew exactly what had to be done and was no longer neurotically devoting her energies to finding reasons for not doing it.

A dim bedside-light burned in the large bedroom, but it didn't seem to bother the occupants, a quaintly engrossed trio who remained completely oblivious of her entrance. Boldly she moved to the telephone and dialed Hal Greener's number. After an interminable series of rings, his sleepy hello yawned across the wire.

"Hal, this is Tecla. Did I wake you?"

A tongue-tied, wits-gathering lull, then, "Wake me? That's okay, baby, I had to get up to answer the phone anyway."

Reassurance warmed her chilled body. Good old steadfast Hal, as unfailing as a heartbeat, and just about as monotonous. Tonight his ever-dependable triteness was a virtue to be cherished.

"Did you get home all right?"

"Sure, baby. Is that why you called me?"

"Well, no. I guess I wanted to tell you I'm sorry."

"Sorry? What about?"

"You know. Standing you up on our dinner date and then sending you home alone. Anyway, Hal, you didn't miss a thing. It turned out to be a very dull party."

"Were you worried about me? Is that why you're calling?"

"Well, yes . . ."

"Then why don't you quit worrying and marry me?"

"Oh, Hal, please, not now. This isn't the time to—"

"You chose the time, didn't you? One way or the other, I'm losing a hell of a lot of sleep over you and it's got to come to a grinding halt. What do you say, Tecla, let's get hitched and stop all this—"

"Not now, I said. Ring me tomorrow. And if you want to take me to dinner I promise I won't stand you up."

"Sure, baby, but—"

"Good night, Hal. Go back to sleep." Smiling, she hung up.

A godsend to womankind, the telephone—it simplified her inherent need to get in the last word.

But she had mended her fences all right. Hal Greener was still her boy, dogged to the end in his unflagging eagerness to tie the marital knot. It was good to know, and definitely a comforting thing to have in reserve.

Meanwhile there was nothing like an adoring male to cure a complex and lift a girl out of the doldrums. With a brand-new lilt to her step she padded across the bedroom floor toward the hallway. A hand reached up from the bed and caught her. It tugged her off balance and she fell.

Immediately more hands touched her. "Relax, honey," a hot breath wheezed in her ear.

Tecla snorted.

A mouth nuzzled her breasts.

And then, quietly and calmly, she extricated herself from the nest of female snakes and continued on her way.

The action in the living room had simmered down somewhat, and collecting her garments was less of a problem than she had expected. She moved about softly and efficiently, staying out of harm's way and exciting no untoward comment.

Finding a place to dress was another matter, but nothing could slow her down now, and she finally wound up in the vestibule just inside the front door.

Fully clothed at last, she fluffed her hair out in makeshift fashion, faintly uneasy without a decent mirror. It probably looked like last year's crow's-nest, but it would have to do. Besides, anybody she might meet on the streets of Manhattan at this hour would undoubtedly be equally disheveled.

The streets of Manhattan—now what had put *that* idea into her head? She was going straight home to bed. Tomorrow was another day, and she would wake up fresh and pretty and perhaps a shade less adamant about fending off the next marriage proposal. Hal Greener was a nice guy, a gentleman from the word *no*—a breed practically extinct in this corner of the wilderness and he deserved a better break than what he was getting. The least she could do would be to get some beauty sleep and make his eyes bulge when he saw her at dinner. The very least.

Only she wasn't a damn bit sleepy. Bored, maybe, and slightly frazzled around the edges, but not sleepy. In fact, after sitting it out for so long on her frostbitten fanny she couldn't help feeling sorry for herself. And a little bit frustrated too.

All that build-up and then nothing—it just wasn't fair. The whole night had been an unsatisfying experience, something like a mountain range with all its peaks lopped off. She was too tense to go to bed, dammit.

Tense? Of course. One more stick of pot—that was all she really needed. Just one.

Okay, the hell with Hal Greener. Let tomorrow be for squares. Tonight—well, tonight there was a grimy little piano-pounder with a stash of dreamy Chicago light green, and he wouldn't mind her knocking on his door no matter what time it was.

Besides, in a way, it was like mending another fence. Sending Frankie home early had been rather mean, and perhaps he rated some kind of break, too. Luckily, though, shabby treatment never seemed to affect Frankie very much. The vaccine of Village life had made him immune, and he had probably forgotten all about the nasty brush-off he had gotten.

Anyway, she was sure he would be glad to see her—and to share the goodies with his uptown-downtown beatmink chick.

Uh-huh. A long taxi ride through the sweet-smelling streets of Manhattan. And wouldn't it be a gas to be picked up by the same comic cabbie who had driven her earlier in the evening? The poor hackie would be mumbling under his breath all the way from Squaresville to Washington Square.